Radicals at Work!

An Activist Strategy for Revitalizing the Labor Movement

A Solidarity Pamphlet

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A Note on the Second Edition

Solidarity first published *Radicals at Work* in June 2001. A lot has changed since then: 9-11, two wars, Bush's re-election, Katrina, and the growth of a tough and resilient anti-war movement.

The labor movement too has changed. As we put out this second edition, SEIU, the Teamsters, and UNITE HERE! have led a dramatic split from the AFL-CIO. Forming the Change to Win Coalition with four other unions, these unions have pledged to devote more resources to organizing the unorganized.

Nevertheless, we still think the ideas in *Radicals at Work* are just as relevant today as they were four years ago.

The fundamental division in the labor movement is not between "progressives" and "conservatives," a "service model" and an "organizing model," or John Sweeney and Andy Stern. These differences matter. But as *Radicals at Work* makes clear, the fundamental split in the labor movement is between those who aim to control the labor movement "from above," and those labor activists who seek to revitalize our movement "from below."

This "from below" approach seeks to change the union movement by drawing on the energy and creativity of workers themselves. This approach emphasizes that *democracy is power*. Democracy and participation don't guarantee worker militancy, but nevertheless they are the best tools we have to encourage it. This approach includes such projects as rank-and-file caucuses like Teamsters for a Democratic Union, *Labor Notes*, minority unions, and workers' centers.

We believe that a "from below" approach can not only build real power for workers but also help make the labor movement a force for social change.

Another change also makes the new edition of *Radicals at Work* still relevant. One of the central themes of this pamphlet is that young radical activists can help the "from below" approach by becoming inside organizers – activists who take jobs in targeted workplaces to organize.

Since *Radicals at Work* first appeared, many young activists have embraced this perspective. Young activists are "salting" in unorganized shops. Others are going into already-organized shops to build workplace organization. The Rank-n-File Youth Project has formed "clusters" of inside organizers so that these new workplace activists can support each other and develop action plans for organizing. This small but growing movement of new "radicals at work" is helping to build a new labor movement from below. *Check out the last page for more information.*

Labor needs radical activists. Radicalism needs labor. This is not a new idea. Radicals of many stripes have always been found in the labor movement. But there's no question that interest in labor activism has been on the rise over the last decade. For students, it began with the appearance of SLACs (Student Labor Action Coalitions) on college campuses in the early nineties.

The change in the AFL-CIO leadership in 1995 created more stir and interest. Soon the AFL-CIO Organizing Institute was aggressively recruiting activists to become organizers. "Seattle" and the shutdown of the World Trade Organization (WTO) further fueled the growing interest in the political potential of the combined forces of the labor movement and radical activism.

Renewed interest in labor issues is alive and well in the many movements where student and anti-corporate globalization activists are organizing for workers' rights. Anti-sweatshop organizing, labor solidarity efforts, living wage campaigns, and mobilizations against the political and financial instruments of global capital (the WTO, International Monetary Fund and proposed Free Trade Area of the Americas) are all important examples of this trend.

Growing numbers of activists continue to take this same spirit into the labor movement itself as union members, staff organizers and activists with community-based labor groups and coalitions.

How can radical activists who support workers' struggles get involved in a way that maximizes both their individual impact and the labor movement's potential to transform our society? In this pamphlet, we'll contrast two approaches to this question, that of the union officialdom including the AFL-CIO leadership, with that of a growing current of grassroots labor activists, including members of our organization, Solidarity.

The AFL-CIO leadership argues that the shrinking size

of union membership is the main obstacle unions face to raising workers' living standards at the bargaining table and leveraging reforms from the political process. Some progressive union officials will openly acknowledge that the labor movement has problems, that many unions are unimaginative, bureaucratic and weak. They will even criticize conservative union officials who are wedded to outmoded "service unionism." But when it comes time to offer prescriptions for labor's renewal, progressive officials and the AFL-CIO leadership are a one-note band: unions must devote more resources to "organizing the unorganized." Then all the rest will somehow fall into place.

To this end, the AFL-CIO leadership and progressive union officials are tapping the energy and commitment of young activists. They argue that radical activists can best help revitalize the labor movement by putting their skills to work full time for unions as professional organizers and appointed union representatives. Such staff-driven strategies can be called labor revitalization "from above."

Many labor activists, including those of us in Solidarity, have a different point of view. We support increased efforts to organize the unorganized and mobilizing models that see unions as part of a movement, not a service industry. But we believe that these changes do not go far enough. The union movement must not merely do more organizing. Unions themselves must be fundamentally reorganized if bigger is going to mean better for working people. To achieve its goal of building power for working people, the labor movement must be just that, *a movement*: one that is feisty, radically democratic, multicultural, and action-oriented, both in the workplace and in the streets.

We see the self-organization and collective action of workers themselves – not staff activism, however well-

From Campus Activist to Teamster Rank-and-File Leader

I first got interested in the labor movement as a college student, where it became clear to me that our society can never be truly democratic as long as its political and economic life are dominated by undemocratic corporations. And that, as human beings, we can never know real democracy as long as one-third of our lives are spent in workplaces that are organized on a totalitarian basis. (If the word totalitarianism seems too strong here, ask yourself when was the last time a corporate decision was made by a vote of the workforce, not by a CEO.)

I dropped out of school, tired of professors who thought they were changing the world with ideas that had no ties to any political action.

I went to a training program sponsored by the AFL-CIO Organizing Institute. But I flunked. They told me that I didn't have what it took to be an organizer. I tried salting for a local union organizing drive, but the drive fizzled.

I heard about the ongoing struggle in the Teamsters union between reform activists from Teamsters for a Democratic Union (TDU) and old-guard officials. I decided to get a job as a rank-and-file Teamster.

The local union I joined was a corrupt and closed-door operation. The officials were constantly cutting backroom deals with employers, and they treated the members with contempt. The first fight I was involved in started when management violated seniority and gave our shop steward the foreperson position because she was a friend of the supervisor. After we filed a grievance and won based on the clear contract language, our own union officials worked with management to find a way around the contract by making our shop steward a temporary assistant supervisor. Members were mad and wanted her out as the steward. I ran for the position and won.

We slowly started building a reform caucus. At first, we were limited to just our one shop. We started publishing a newsletter that aired members' gripes and informed people about what was happening on the job. Over time, we became a local-wide group as we made contact with members from other bargaining units. We started to publish a newsletter about local-wide issues, and began helping members from different shops to become stewards, enforce their contracts, and prepare for contract bargaining.

We organized campaigns to reform our local union bylaws. We succeeded in winning changes that made our local union president more accountable to the executive board, and we shortened officers' terms from five years to three.

Our officers got caught embezzling union funds and our local was placed in trusteeship by the International Union. By removing the worst elements of the old leadership and making cosmetic reforms, the trusteeship neutralized some of the

intentioned or progressive – as the key to putting the movement back into the labor movement. While it is sometimes possible for a union staffer to promote worker self-organization and militancy, these politics often come into conflict with the methods of the employer or the union officialdom. In Solidarity, we believe that radical activists should focus on strengthening movements to revitalize the labor movement "from below." Through our labor activism we work:

- to promote a militant attitude toward employers which recognizes that employers and workers have fundamentally opposing interests and that workers' gains are made through organization and struggle.
- to develop workers as activists, organizers and leaders in organizing drives, contract fights, workplace struggles and community-labor alliances.
- to democratize the labor movement and create a relationship between leaders and members that gives working people real power in their organizations.
- to broaden the labor movement beyond unions and to forge alliances among unions, community-based worker organizations and social movements.
- to fight racism, sexism and homophobia in the workplace and in the labor movement and to support the organization and leadership of women and people of color.
- to break labor's dependency on the corporate-controlled Democratic and Republican parties.
- to rebuild the severed connections between working-class labor militants and non-sectarian socialist activism.

support we had from members who just wanted a cleaner union. Our challenge has become to convince members that our grassroots approach will make our union not just cleaner, but stronger when it comes to taking on management.

Being in TDU has given me a chance to link the activism in my local to similar work happening throughout our union. Our statewide TDU chapter brings together Teamsters from about half a dozen different local unions.

The chapter holds educational conferences and workshops where we share strategies and build our organizing skills. These conferences, and national TDU conventions, play an important role in developing the leadership skills of TDU activists who spread our organizing tactics and vision to members in our shops and locals.

Our TDU chapter has played an important role in key Teamster struggles. During the national strike in the freight industry in 1994, old-guard officials in our area refused to distribute the strike bulletins produced by the reform leadership then in power at the International Union. We filled the gap by passing out the strike information at freight barns and keeping strike lines strong.

During the 1997 UPS strike, local old-guard officials again boycotted national strike activities. Our chapter sponsored rallies and involved UPS workers in leafleting the public at sporting events, picketing UPS trucks and visiting customers.

Our chapter also functions as the statewide campaign organization for reform candidates for local and International office. We campaign at worksites, tour candidates, and organize phone banks. The majority of Teamsters in my state have voted for reform candidates in the last two national elections, something that never would have happened without TDU.

TDU builds the strength of our union on many fronts, from contract enforcement to strikes to reform campaigns for union office. We have an impact that far outweighs our numbers. TDU activity touches hundreds of thousands of members nationwide, but our own organization is held together by a relatively small core of activists. In my state, a steering committee of 15 plans chapter activities. An even smaller group of a half dozen or so holds that committee together. TDU is a place where a committed activist can make a huge difference.

Only a few of us in my TDU chapter would describe themselves as being on the left. TDU is about promoting activism that is grassroots, more than "radical." It's about building people's sense of their own power. In my experience, Teamster members who have never been part of collective action tend to see the union as something distant and irrelevant. But once a group of workers have participated in a struggle together, they begin to look at things differently. The conventional wisdom that "You can't beat city hall" has less bite.

The author is a member of Teamsters for a Democratic Union.

What analysis lies behind these competing "from above" and "from below" approaches? What kinds of organizations and activism promote labor revitalization from below? What are alternatives to traditional staff jobs for activists who want to help transform the labor movement? What kinds of staff jobs are best for activists interested in promoting worker self-organization and struggle? These are some of the issues we will address in this pamphlet, including by looking at the activist experiences of different Solidarity members and other labor activists involved in grassroots organizing.

New Politics Through Independent Activism

Many people who take union staff positions are drawn by the opportunity to work as full-time activists. It is often assumed that union officials have a plan that will channel the full-time energies of young staffers into efforts that will build real power for working people. We will argue that, with rare exceptions, this is not at all the case. The flawed politics and practices of the same officials who are seeking to employ young activists constitute one of the major weaknesses of the labor movement.

The "from below" strategy assumes that these politics and practices must be challenged, and, for reasons that we will explore later, that this challenge must necessarily come from a base of activism and organization that is independent of the labor officialdom.

Such "from below" projects include:

- **Union reform caucuses** which are organizations of members who organize to make their unions militant and democratic organizations capable of fighting the employers in the workplace. Reform caucuses publish newsletters, hold educational workshops, promote shop-floor activism and resistance, develop rank-and-file leaders, and run reform candidates for union office. Reform caucuses exist mostly at the local union level, like New Directions in Transport Workers Union Local 100, an organization of New York City subway workers and bus drivers, or Second Opinion, a reform caucus of Los Angeles public school teachers. Teamsters for a Democratic Union (TDU) is the most prominent national rank-and-file caucus with thousands of members and, most unusual, an office and full-time staff of its own. In unions where there is no rank-and-file caucus as such, Solidarity members promote rank-and-file activism in various ways: by organizing actions on the job, by working with others to put out shop-floor newsletters, by participating in committees to help organize new members, or by running for union office.

- ***Labor Notes***, a national newsletter that covers the organizing efforts of union reformers and other labor activists. More than just a publication, *Labor Notes* is an organizing center that promotes dialogue and debate among labor activists from different union and community-based labor projects. In addition to sponsoring a biennial conference that is the premier gathering of grassroots labor activists; *Labor Notes* has sponsored regional schools and workshops on labor-management cooperation schemes, union democracy and other challenges facing union activists.

- **The Association for Union Democracy (AUD)**, another important alternative institution for labor activists. AUD defends the free-speech rights of union members, advises them on enforcing their internal union rights and organizing for union reform, and organizes conferences and workshops for union reform activists.

- **Jobs with Justice**, a coalition that brings labor and community activists together on the local level to support each other's organizing and to launch joint efforts such as campaigns for a living wage. Depending on the local area, Jobs with Justice coalitions can be feisty and grassroots, tightly controlled by union officials, or a mixture of the two.

- **Community-based labor organizations**, some calling themselves workers centers, are another important source of independent labor organizing. Often rooted in immigrant or African-American communities, workers centers develop working-class leadership through popular education programs and struggles around workplace and community issues, including nonpayment of wages, discrimination, health and safety violations, plant closings, unionization efforts, and so on. A few examples are Black Workers for Justice in North Carolina, the Workplace Project/*Centro de Derechos Laborales* in Hempstead, New York, and the Coalition of Immokalee Workers in Florida.

Solidarity members are activists in these kinds of or-

ganizing projects because they promote worker self-organization and struggle. Projects such as these challenge the dominant politics and practices of the labor movement. What are those politics and practices and why can't they be corrected by progressive staff activism alone? We'll turn to these questions next.

Can Labor Relations Be Win-Win?

"We want to help American business compete in the world and create new wealth for your shareholders. We want to work with you to make a larger pie which all Americans can share, and not just argue with you about how to divide the existing pie."

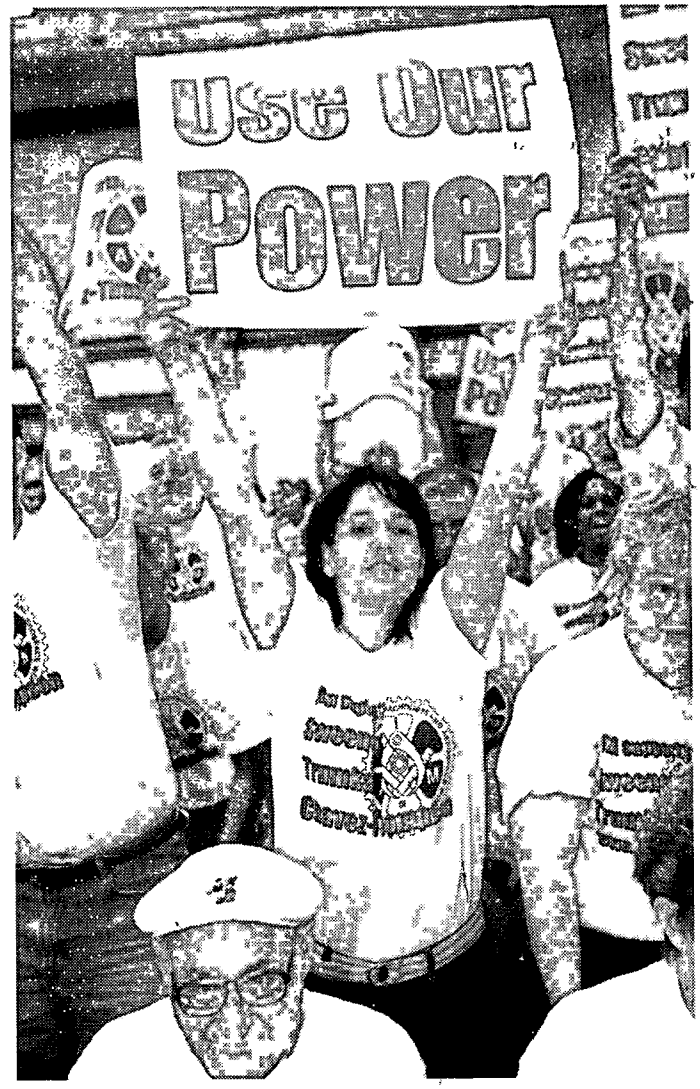
- John Sweeney, President, AFL-CIO, in a letter promoting a "dialogue" between labor leaders and corporate executives, including the CEOs of General Electric, JP Morgan, General Motors, AT&T, and USX.

The AFL-CIO has come up with its own definition of what's wrong with American political economy. To put it simply, "Corporate America is too greedy for its own good."

After he was elected to lead the AFL-CIO, John Sweeney addressed a series of gatherings of concerned business executives. In his speeches, Sweeney called for a "social compact." He argued that unions ultimately serve the best interests of Corporate America, and that enlightened employer self-interest should lead companies to take the "high road" in labor relations. Partnership with a union plus a high-wage, high-performance workplace would yield greater productivity, better quality and therefore higher profits. It would be a win-win situation for workers and employers alike.

The problem is that employers don't take the low road of cutting jobs, using low-wage labor, and busting unions because they are short-sighted or poor managers. They do so because they know that strong unions don't enhance profits, they cut into them. Strong unions reduce profits by fighting for safer (and therefore more costly) working conditions and higher wages and benefits, which reduce the "percentage of the pie" that goes to employers and stockholders as profit.

The idea that workers and bosses can avoid this inherent conflict by working together to raise productivity ("increase the size of the pie") is an old one. It may be comforting to think that cooperation can win out over conflict, but the internal dynamics of the profit system makes this impossible. Capitalism is a system characterized by periodic short-term economic downturns (recessions) and episodic long-term crises of profitability. When these occur, employers, as a matter of survival, will seek to raise productivity by attacking workers' gains.



To take the most recent example, falling profits from the late 1960s through the early 1990s compelled employers to go on the offensive against workers and their unions. Successful companies used plant closings, concessions, work-rule changes, speed-up, contracting out, deregulation, NAFTA and other "free trade" agreements, outsourcing of production to low-wage areas, the implementation of management-by-stress techniques and outright union-busting to squeeze more production out of workers for lower real wages.

A Labor/Community Alliance for "Jobs with Justice"

In 1987, 11,000 union members gathered in Miami to support striking Eastern Airlines workers as an answer to the call for "Jobs with Justice" put out by the leadership of several manufacturing and service sector unions. The demonstration of solidarity against the Reagan-Bush era attack on working people hardly matched the media image of the pale, male, and stale labor bureaucracy. And a new coalition was born.

From the start, Jobs with Justice (JwJ) demanded class-wide unity. Workers at the Miami rally filled out the trademark blue membership cards pledging to "be there" for someone else's struggle five times in the next year.

Since then, JwJ has grown into a national community-labor coalition with chapters in 40 cities around the country. Though initially controlled centrally through the AFL-CIO bureaucracy, today JwJ is characterized by the autonomy of local chapters. A minority of local coalitions continues to be tightly controlled by labor bureaucrats, but most offer many avenues for rank-and-file workers to participate in working-class struggles. The most successful JwJ chapters are models for militant and democratic participation by rank-and-file activists.

Jobs with Justice is distinguished by three key contributions: first, the aggressive and consistent use of direct action; second, the successful building of bridges between unions and community-based organizations, especially in communities of color; and, third, the will to fight for forward-looking issues such as national health care and the rights of welfare recipients to organize into unions. Workers and activists in local coalitions have helped to organize thousands of people into unions, won Living Wage initiatives, joined with students in anti-sweatshop campaigns, and created bridges between immigrant communities and the labor movement.

My own experience with Jobs with Justice began in 1996, while I was a community organizer in Providence, Rhode Island. My organization, Direct Action for Rights and Equality (DARE), was made up of working poor and unemployed Black and Latino folks, many of whom have never been in unions. Members of DARE had walked many picket lines supporting union members, but just as often encountered racist and backward practices from the police and teachers' unions. DARE viewed Jobs with Justice as a mechanism for creating real power for people of color in the labor movement. We chose our initial projects carefully to build an anti-racist orientation. Six months after founding the coalition, we helped to prevent for-profit Columbia HCA's purchase of a community hospital in a Black, Latino and Asian neighborhood.

The even division of the coalition's two co-chairs between representatives from community and labor helped ease concerns about balancing the interests of both constituency groups. By the second year I was chair of Rhode Island JwJ, and we balanced our support to unions by participating in community-based campaigns to organize temp workers and daycare providers. The coalition grew significantly, as we overcame our initial isolation as a collection of the usual suspects of Rhode Island lefties by providing powerful support for healthcare workers negotiating contracts and UPS strikers.

Our largest and most successful event came during a national Jobs with Justice Day of Action around Welfare/Workfare. We organized a hearing at the State House where unemployed mothers testified about the lack of decent jobs and the need for affordable education and training. Former welfare recipients who acquired their first decent jobs by becoming union members talked about the need to fight corporate greed. Union rank and filers and welfare recipients looked around the meeting room and saw themselves allied against liberal politicians and corporate interests.

Jobs with Justice is a meeting place for the left of the labor movement (including community-based worker organizations), a place to offer meaningful class-wide support to fights on a local level, and a place to build our support for key social and economic justice demands none of us can win alone.

Rob Baril is an organizer with 1199-CT in New Haven, Connecticut.

Since 1973, the percentage of non-agricultural workers belonging to US unions has dropped from 25.8 percent to 13.9 percent, down from a high point of 34.7 percent in 1954. After adjusting for inflation, workers' real hourly wages have fallen consistently over the same period. To keep up, workers today work, on average, more than 100 more hours a year than they did in 1973. The percentage of workers with full or partial health care coverage has dropped from 70.2 percent in 1979 to just 62.6 percent today. The numbers are even more dismal for people of color. Only 59.7 percent of African Americans and 45.2 percent of Latinos have coverage.

This protracted assault on workers' wages, benefits and working conditions finally allowed US corporations to restore profits in the last decade. Companies that failed to change with the times have been left behind, facing declining market shares and profits and the possibility of bankruptcy. The market rewards employers that increase productivity (and thus, profits) through lower wages and speed-up. It punishes those companies that do not. The problem with corporate greed isn't greedy bosses. It's an economic system where greed ("profit maximization") is the price of survival. Corporate greed and strategies that boost productivity at workers' expense aren't irrational for employers. They're the rules of the game.

The harsh reality is that under a profit system, workers can never compel a lasting "social compact" with capital. Ultimately, corporations must beat back workers' gains to restore capitalist profitability or workers must organize a movement to end the rule of capital. That is why throughout history, working-class revolutionaries have sought to establish a truly democratic society where economic production is for human need, not profit: what we call socialism.

For Solidarity, our activism in the labor movement is shaped by our recognition of this reality. We promote worker-led organization and struggle for two equally important reasons. They are the most effective means for workers to win gains in the short-term and are fundamental steps toward our long-term goal of revolutionary change. We are passionate about workers' struggles and see them as much more than yard-markers toward some future goal. However, recognizing that the profit system is a dead end for working people leads us to think about labor struggles in a broader context.

Worker-led activism helps workers gain experience as organizers and leaders. Through struggle, workers also gain a sense of their collective power and experience the resistance of both corporations and the state to their most basic demands for dignity and justice. The effect can be radicalizing. Growing numbers of workers in struggle begin to relate to other struggles and come to see our society's conflicts as "us" (workers and oppressed peoples) versus "them" (corporations and corporate politicians). In periods like today, where corporate power is overwhelming and workers are largely unorganized and on the defensive, building a socialist alternative will seem remote, utopian, and even dangerous to most workers. But as the scale of worker organization and social struggle increases, workers can become increasingly open to alternative, even revolutionary, ideas.

The route from here to there will be neither quick nor easy. It will take a long time to build a mass working-class movement for socialism. We may never get there. But the alternative isn't an illusory "social compact" with employers. It is a never-ending cycle of capitalist boom and bust – of exploitation, discrimination and ecological devastation under the best of circumstances – and of full-scale assaults on workers' every economic and social gain every time a new crisis of profitability threatens capital's bottom line.

Building an Independent Union of Clerical Workers

Our effort to build union power for clerical employees at the University of California (UC) began in an unlikely place: a drive to decertify our union.

At the time of the decertification effort, we worked in an "open shop." Our union, the American Federation of State, County, and Municipal Employees (AFSCME), represented nearly 19,000 clerical employees statewide. But less than 1,000 were dues-paying union members.

Given the low dues income, AFSCME officials were not terribly interested in the union's members at UC. Where AFSCME representatives were visible, they were a negative presence. Union staff were indifferent or condescending toward members and hostile to efforts to inform and involve the rank and file. Local activists had the impossible job of trying to recruit more workers to the union, fight a hostile and aggressive employer, and at the same time struggle against AFSCME staffers who resisted our involvement. Fed up, in 1995 we decided to break with AFSCME and form an independent union, the Coalition of University Employees (CUE).

To become the official bargaining unit at UC, CUE had 12 months to gather signatures from 30 percent of the bargaining unit calling for an election. For the majority of this period, CUE had no paid staff. Rank-and-file involvement was less a virtue than a necessity. We forced a recognition election by gathering signatures from 45 percent of the workforce, and become the official bargaining agent of UC clericals by a vote of 63 percent (21 percent voted for AFSCME, and only 16 percent voted for "no representation") in November, 1997.

When we started CUE, with limited resources, we had no choice but to reject the "service model" of unionism. We didn't have the staff available to "service the client." Organizing, grievances, newsletters, workshops – these were all done by rank-and-file members. We found new activists in a variety of ways. We held "know your rights" workshops, and used those to identify and develop leaders. Where people were insecure about their abilities, it helped tremendously to be able to point out that CUE's leaders were clericals just like them.

Our leadership development efforts largely succeeded. Although the founders of CUE primarily came out of the ranks of fed-up AFSCME activists, our current leadership is overwhelmingly made up of members who became active after we left AFSCME. One ongoing failure has been that although our elected leaders are primarily women, they are also primarily white. Making our leadership more representative of our membership is an absolute necessity.

In 1998, we began bargaining our first contract, which is now one of the strongest union contracts at UC. Our demands

High Road or Road to Nowhere?

The AFL-CIO's model of mobilizing workers to reach an accommodation with capital does not just exist as bad economic theory. It is also applied at the level of the individual organizing drive. Notably, the union that has most clearly articulated this strategy is the Service Employees International Union (SEIU), the International Union with one of the most progressive reputations in the AFL-CIO.

In July 1999, SEIU published a booklet for organizers called *The High Road: A Winning Strategy for Managing Conflict and Communicating Effectively in Hospital Worker Organizing Campaigns.*

Based on opinion polls and focus groups of hospital workers, the *High Road* provides some useful practical advice. It warns organizers that aggressive anti-union campaigns by management create a climate of tension and fear that can intimidate middle-of-the-road employees out of supporting the union. It points out that hard-core activists look at unions differently than most potential members and that these differences have to be considered as part of a union's communications strategy. It encourages organizers to let workers speak for themselves in union leaflets rather than substituting exaggerated or canned rhetoric.

So far, so good. But the *High Road* goes much further, and in the wrong direction. The *High Road* advocates a U-turn from the proven strategy of focusing on activist leaders and assisting them in building the unity and

reflected members' concerns and our contract campaign relied on rank-and-file involvement to build unity and pressure.

We wanted contract language that would restrict the university's ability to institute new work rules, which sounds dry but is probably the single most important factor determining the quality of our work lives. The university was sure people wouldn't care about the issue, so we asked clericals to share examples of unreasonable work rules.

We presented hundreds of letters detailing examples of demeaning dress codes, ridiculous attendance policies, etc., as well as scores of emotional letters supporting CUE's position. We used a similar approach to address the problem of discrimination at the university, and won the ability to take discrimination grievances to arbitration. We weren't able to go as far as we wanted to bring clerical wages up to the market level, but we did succeed in making many improvements to our wage structure.

When CUE started, our only resources came from our limited dues income. Beginning in January of 2000, things changed dramatically. California's governor signed legislation that requires all UC employees to pay an "agency fee" to the union even if they choose not to be members. As a result, CUE's budget increased at least tenfold. We are still in the process of figuring out how these new resources are going to affect the way in which CUE functions.

CUE has already been approached by AFL-CIO unions about affiliating with them. It is possible that CUE's presence in a larger union might help spread union reform and change. On the other hand, even unions with progressive reputations have proven very effective at containing grassroots activism within their ranks to "acceptable levels." CUE might find that its own practices and structure are what gets changed through affiliation, in ways that create less space for direct member control.

CUE tries to make our decisions in the broadest possible way. When CUE took a position on the issue of extending benefits to employees' domestic partners, we didn't just pass an executive board resolution. We sent out arguments for and against the change (authored by members), and held a membership vote. After we were successful in convincing CUE members to support this issue, we made a point of making our position as visible and public as we could. CUE leaders trust members to make the right decisions, and hope that builds a reciprocal trust in the organization.

Since the majority of CUE's leaders were not part of the AFSCME experience, they don't all share the same views about problems with bureaucratic unions or the virtues of rank-and-file democracy. All of CUE's officers are UC employees, most working a 40-hour work week and doing their union work on top of that. This can be a tremendous burden, and makes the idea of an efficient service-model union pretty attractive. In order to keep CUE a member-run union, we will need to address this problem so that activists have the support they need to continue providing our union's leadership without burning out.

Claudette Begin, Claudia Horning, and Michael-David Sasson are clerical workers at the University of California and members of CUE.

organization that is required to beat management's anti-union attack.

Instead of developing a rank-and-file activist leadership that can win over uncertain co-workers, the *High Road* shifts the focus to placating the concerns of the vacillating center. The *High Road* instructs organizers to tell workers that "The ultimate goal of unionization is to foster a cooperative relationship with management," and says "Organizing campaigns must stress – as a core value – the importance of working together with management to meet mutual goals and make the hospital a better place for all."

But workers don't need a union organizer to tell them that management wants to make their workplace "a better place for all." Management is more than happy to make that false promise to workers every day without charging union dues.

Workers need a union to organize collective action, secure protections against management abuses, and build the organization and power that will advance them toward their goals such as higher pay, better benefits, adequate staffing, and a safer and less stressful workplace. These goals are in direct conflict with management's agenda.

Management does not make concessions to workers unless the cost of failing to do so is higher than the cost of the concessions themselves. That means workers need to be prepared to fight and organized enough to exert meaningful pressure. By downplaying the reality of conflict between labor and management, the *High Road* approach undercuts workers' ability to organize against the problems that compel them to unionize in the first place.

Can't Get It From Your Boss? Ask a Corporate Politician!

If workers are not to make gains through militant struggle in the workplace, then how will they? Sweeney and other progressive labor officials have an answer: through electoral politics and the Democratic Party.

As we've seen, bigger unions do not automatically translate into more power in relationship to the boss, not when labor's strategy is to seek "common purpose" and "foster a cooperative relationship with management."

Larger unions may, however, be more effective at one thing – getting out the vote. Surveys show that union members are more likely to vote, and to vote Democratic, than are their non-union counterparts. An impressive 26 million votes from union households cast ballots in the 2000 election, accounting for 26 percent of all votes, up from 18 percent in 1996.

A principle motivation of the AFL-CIO's emphasis on organizing the unorganized is to increase the number of unionized workers that union officials can turn out to vote Democratic, or even better, to work actively for Democratic candidates. This stepped-up member activism (and heftier campaign contributions) is supposed to influence Democratic politicians to pay more attention to working families' priorities. Or so the theory goes.

One problem with this plan is that members of unions that are weak on the job and at the bargaining table may not be likely to heed their officials' exhortations to support the candidates backed by their officials. Some 8 million union household voters (nearly one-third of the total) voted for George W. Bush in the 2000 election, a 3 million increase over the number of union voters who went for the Republican candidate in 1996. Nearly 800,000 additional union household voters cast ballots for Ralph Nader.

A more serious problem is that the vast majority of Democratic politicians are too beholden to corporations to make their election pay dividends for workers. The Democratic administration of Bill Clinton brought us

NAFTA, welfare "reform," the Effective Death Penalty Act and immigration "reform" that reduced undocumented immigrants' ability to legalize their status and increased restrictions on legal immigrants. The Clinton administration also took no action to fight for issues like striker replacement legislation, amnesty for undocumented workers, single-payer health care, or labor law reform to make it easier for workers to join unions.

The lack of any viable third-party alternative leaves labor with nowhere to go at election time, no matter how badly their interests are disregarded by the Democratic Party. No wonder Democratic politicians "play to the center" and take the vote of one of its core voting constituencies for granted. Grassroots efforts that promote a break with the Democratic Party (like the Labor Party, Green Party and Labor for Nader Committees) foster a much-needed debate over labor's electoral strategy, and are an important part of a complete strategy to revitalize the labor movement.

The AFL-CIO's plan to avoid challenging employers directly, and to seek influence electorally instead, has a final fatal flaw. When unions avoid confronting employers in the workplace, they avoid confronting corporate power at its source. It is in the workplace that all goods and services are produced and all profits are accumulated. And it is there that workers can most directly exercise their own power: the power to impair or halt production and with it the accumulation of profits. This power – the power to disrupt "business as usual" – is critical to workers' ability to win gains politically and fundamental to any effort to radically transform society.

Building the Labor Movement as an Anti-Racist Movement

The US working class is more diverse than at any time in our history. According to the 2000 Census, "non-whites" now represent a quarter of the US population. While the "white" population only increased by 9 percent from 1990 to 2000, over the same period the Black population increased by 22 percent, the Latino population by 58 percent, and the Asian population by 74 percent. For the first time ever, "minorities" make up the majority of the total population of the 100 largest US cities.

But without organization, greater numbers have not necessarily meant greater power for workers of color, or for women. Black workers and female workers still earn a little less than 75 cents to every dollar earned by white, male workers. The combined impact of racial and gender discrimination is even more devastating. While a white male working full time earned a median yearly wage of $34,631 in 1998, over the same period a Black female earned only

$21,738, and a Hispanic female $16,705. In other words, a Hispanic female could expect to earn less than half as much as her white male counterpart!

These wage statistics reflect the skewed balance of power in the "global workplace." Neoliberal government policies and lean production workplace organization have compelled millions of people to immigrate to the United States, where they encounter sweatshops, day labor and

low-wage, service sector jobs. Anti-immigrant prejudice, and in the case of undocumented workers the threat of deportation, fuel the super-exploitation of immigrant workers.

The US labor leadership has historically resorted to exclusionary, and often blatantly racist, policies in misguided attempts to "protect" unionized workers from the "competition" of African-American, immigrant and foreign workers. Supporting both the Chinese Exclusion Act in 1882 and the establishment of immigration quotas through the Immigration and Naturalization Act of 1924, excluding African-Americans from unions and skilled trades, and backing the Immigration Reform and Control Act in 1986 are just a few of the worst examples of the labor movement's exclusionary record toward workers of color. In this context, recent efforts to break down barriers within the labor movement, such as increased funding for organizing low-wage workers of color, the AFL-CIO's recent reversal of its position on employer sanctions and its call for a general amnesty for undocumented immigrants are important and welcome developments.

AFL-CIO policy changes and the rising number of union organizing drives among low-wage workers seem to offer an avenue to activists who want to build power for workers of color. This has been a principal appeal of staff jobs with unions like SEIU, HERE, UNITE, and the UFCW to radical activists disgusted by a society rampant with racism and a political and economic system that disproportionately exploits people of color. Black, Latino and Asian workers have played a leading role in some of the most inspiring organizing victories of the last decade.

But, while some unions are doing more organizing with workers of color, the labor movement falls short of being a movement against racism as well as economic exploitation. To be an antiracist movement, the labor movement must be more than numerically diverse. It must organize against racism in the workplace, ally with antiracist movements in the community, and develop and promote the leadership of workers of color in its own ranks.

Antiracist activism of this kind exists very unevenly in today's labor movement. Most unions practice a kind of "race neutral" organizing where racism – even in the workplace – is considered a divisive side issue, not a union concern. Some unions that take progressive, antiracist stands on issues outside of the workplace – such as police brutality – do little to organize against racism on the shop floor. And while organizing increasing numbers of workers of color into unions is vital, it does not automatically lead to promoting leadership and rank-and-file power among workers of color once they are union members.

A striking example of this problem is the case of SEIU Local 399 in Los Angeles. In the early 1990s, thousands of workers joined Local 399 through Justice for Janitors

Why Bother with Unionized Industrial Workers?

Aren't efforts to reform U.S. industrial unions made irrelevant by changes in the global economy? After all, we are told that high-tech industries and services are the future of the U.S. economy. And doesn't building reform movements in existing unions prioritize organizing with white male industrial workers instead of low-wage workers, people of color and women?

Perhaps surprisingly, the answer to both these questions is a resounding "no." Building strong reform movements in unions of industrial workers is an essential part of any strategy to revitalize the labor movement.

While it is true that the industrial working class has declined as a percentage of the workforce from about half the private sector 40 years ago to less than 30 percent today, the overall number of industrial workers is down only slightly, from about 22 million in the 1970s to slightly more than 20 million today.

More importantly, the percentage of the Gross Domestic Product produced by this declining number of industrial workers has actually grown in the same period. What's more, the goods produced by these workers are literally the foundation of almost all other economic activity. That is, it is the industrial working class that produces the entire infrastructure (roads, ports, airports, railroads, factories, office buildings, transportation, housing, etc.) on which all other economic activity depends.

Despite changes in the economy, both real and hyped, the industrial working class has a potential power that no other social grouping within or outside the working class has. This is only *potential* power, waiting to be organizing and exercised in alliance with other social forces. But this power is fundamental to any attempt to radically transform and reorganize U.S. society.

Union reform efforts among the industrial working class impact all workers, not just white men. Contrary to popular assumptions, workers of color are found among the ranks of industrial workers at a slightly higher percentage than their level of representation in the workforce as a whole. African Americans are 11 percent of the industrial workforce vs. 10 percent overall. Latinos are 8 percent vs. 7.6 percent. Although unions are as riddled with racism as any American institution, they are also among the most multicultural in the country.

While women have been underrepresented in the industrial workforce (27 percent compared to 45.7 percent in the total private workforce), they have grown as a proportion in recent decades. In some industrial sectors, women's numbers are nearly comparable to their representation in the overall workforce: 33 percent in manufacturing, 41 percent in nondurable manufacturing and 45 percent in communications.

Overall, by 1992, white males composed only a slight majority of the industrial workforce compared to two-thirds thirty years earlier.

The importance of reform activity in the major unions of industrial workers comes from the continued centrality of these workers to the economy. If industrial workers remain disorganized within their unions – or unorganized like the tens of thousands of non-union auto parts workers who are being neglected by the United Auto Workers which is instead targeting the service sector – then the essential contribution of mobilized industrial workers to working-class movements for political change will be lost.

Of course, even a revived labor movement – let alone the radically democratic restructuring of the U.S. economy and society – will require much more than democratic unions of industrial workers. A new labor movement will need to join democratic unions of workers from all economic sectors with community-based labor organizations and ally them with social movement organizations for racial, gender, environmental and economic justice. This resurgent movement will need to engage in workplace actions, street mobilizations and independent political action.

Such a movement can only exist if done on many fronts. But a strategy that jettisons the need to organize for union reform among industrial workers removes a critical element of the equation: the economic power of workers who are fundamental to the economy and society.

Much of the above argument, and all of its figures, are taken from "The Industrial Working Class Today: Why It Still Matters—Or Does It?" by Kim Moody, *Against the Current*, October 1995. This article defines the industrial working class as private-sector production or non-supervisory workers (and their households) in mining, construction, manufacturing, transportation, communications and energy production.

organizing campaigns that involved mass mobilizations and even confrontations with police violence. But after winning their union elections, newly organized workers found themselves in a local union that had little in common with the vision of self-empowerment and democracy they organized for. In 1995, citing poor representation, weak contracts in the local's health care division, and a dues hike, rank-and-file janitors and health care workers formed the Multiracial Alliance and mounted a successful opposition campaign for union office.

The Multiracial Alliance carried every position they contested, winning two of the top four officer spots and 16 other executive board positions. Following the election, the majority of the executive board clashed with the principal officer, passing proposals to establish an education department, a complaint panel composed of rank-and-file members, and increased disclosure of the local's finances. With tensions mounting between the principal officer and the executive board majority, the Alliance began a 21-day hunger strike to push for the implementation of their proposals. John Sweeney, who was then SEIU President, intervened and imposed a trusteeship on the local. Sweeney suspended the powers of the officers and executive board and appointed an International representative to run the union. The message to workers seemed to be: "Organize to get a union, but stop once you have one."

How have workers of color and antiracist allies responded to the challenge to build power from below within the labor movement?

One inspiring example of grassroots antiracist organizing is the Latino-led reform struggle in Teamsters Local 556 in Eastern Washington state. For decades, Local 556 was dominated by old-guard Anglo officials even though 80 percent of the membership is Latino. Union meetings were held only in English. Shop stewards were handpicked by the local's principal officer. Year after year went by with no effective challenge to abusive supervisors, speed up, and an epidemic of injuries and health and safety problems at the food processing companies represented by the local.

In July 1997, the refusal of the chief shop steward at Iowa Beef Processors (IBP) to file grievances or take any action to defend workers sparked a rank-and-file rebellion. Workers launched a petition drive demanding a new chief shop steward. When the local's principal officer refused to take action, they filed a complaint with the International Union and got in contact with Teamsters for a Democratic Union. With TDU's assistance, the IBP workers formed a member-to-member organizing network that led to a series of shop-floor victories.

In 1999, the activist network launched a rank-and-file contract campaign that culminated in a five-week strike. Old guard Teamster officials conspired to end the strike and force a weak contract on the membership. In the wake of the strike, Teamster President James Hoffa imposed a trusteeship on the local to block reformers from winning

the impending election for union officers. But activists took the International to court, and in the summer of 2000, members swept a reform slate into office.

The new local leadership – nine out of ten members of the new staff and executive board are Latino activists from IBP – are training stewards and rank-and-file activists across the local.

Another example of grassroots, antiracist union work can be seen in the organizing of African-American service workers at the University of North Carolina. North Carolina is a right-to-work state (3 percent union) where public employees have no collective bargaining rights.

After years of groundwork by Black Workers for Justice, the United Electrical Workers (UE) charted Local 150 to build power for UNC employees. Although the local does not have a contract with the university, the campus workers have forced a sort of unofficial "recognition." They pay their dues by payroll deduction, and they put on a "Campaign 2000" that won their largest wage increase in 15 years. Individual racist supervisors are targeted in workplace actions.

UE 150 leaders deliberately build ties between union and community issues, for example, fighting for relief for victims of Hurricane Floyd who were neglected by state services. In the winter of 2000, UE 150 members began working to build a united front to fight racism by linking with the Farm Labor Organizing Committee (FLOC) to form the African-American-Latino Alliance. The Alliance has issued a call for a general amnesty for undocumented workers.

These are only a few examples of the kind of antiracist labor activism from below that is needed to help build the labor movement as a movement against racism. By the year 2050 the US population is predicted to be 14 percent Black, 25 percent Latino and 8 percent Asian.

As the demographic changes in the US working class ontinue, labor activists must step up our efforts to chalnge the overlapping burdens of institutional racism and conomic exploitation. In an increasingly diverse society, e labor movement restricts itself to traditional "labor" sues at its own peril. Antiracist activism, as well as the ht against sex and gender discrimination, must be made entral part of the labor movement's agenda.

Union Power Through Rank-and-File Power

Some left-wing labor activists agree with the criticisms we've discussed (the fantasy of labor-management cooperation, the dangers of the "High Road," the labor movement's dead-end reliance on the Democratic Party, and the need to build an anti-racist labor movement), but nevertheless believe the best route for radical activists who want to have an impact on the labor movement is through positions in the labor officialdom. Such positions, they reason, allow for full-time activism. And, after all, it's among the officialdom that the decisions get made.

Those who advocate this route often argue that the bulk of the labor leadership, whatever their shortcomings, are more progressive than the rank-and-file. They see the vast majority of the union membership as conservative or apolitical relative to the union leaders who, because of their full-time engagement with the problems confronting the labor movement, are seen as more politically sympathetic to the concerns of radical activists. By seeking out staff positions, it is assumed activists can position themselves where their progressive ideas can get a hearing and have an impact. Boosted by the energy of a new generation of students turned labor organizers, the theory goes, a resurgent progressive officialdom can lead the revitalization of the labor movement.

This view fits nicely into top-down mobilization models in which the role of the union membership is to be activated into campaigns designed and coordinated by staff. The best rank-and-file leaders may be incorporated as stewards and mobilizers in tightly scripted, top-down mobilizations. But real union democracy is considered a side road at best, and a misadventure at worst, because the bulk of the membership is too apathetic, politically backward or lacking in the necessary information and skills to make key decisions.

A left-wing union president summarized this view most bluntly when he said, "The membership can only be a sounding board, even the delegates [shop stewards] can't make decisions. The idea of wisdom emanating from the bottom-up is full of shit, not because the rank-and-file are stupid but because they have a job which is not running the union and knowing all the intricate business about it."

"Radical" Bureaucrats and "Conservative" Workers

The assumption is sometimes made that labor officials are more "progressive" or "radical" than rank-and-file workers, and that consequently young activists have more of a natural affinity with the leadership than with the members of a union. Usually this assumption goes unstated, but sometimes it is made explicit. A good example appears in a series of articles on student-labor activism in the Spring 2000 issue of *The Activist*, a publication of the Democratic Socialists of America. DSA states that it has "many friends and members in the new AFL-CIO (including President John Sweeney)." For this reason, it is instructive to consider the analysis of the relationship between students, union officials, and the rank-and-file membership that DSA presents.

In this publication aimed at young activists, DSA describes union officials as "radical" and union members as "conservative." Not once, not twice, but three times, the point is made about 1) "the disparity between union leadership's politics (radical) and rank-and-file (often conservative)," 2) the "forward-looking leadership" and "sometimes-conservative politics of rank-and-file members," and 3) the "radical leadership" and "rank-and-file members often less prone to Left politics."

Two of the passages cited refer to the "radical" leaders and "conservative" rank-and-file members of the United Steelworkers of America (USWA). The Steelworkers' leadership is praised for "recognizing the need to move away from the protectionism and nationalism that has traditionally characterized American labor."

It would be great if this were true. But a look at some of the rhetoric the USWA has employed in fights against steel imports, WTO expansion and Permanent Normal Trade Relations with China suggests they have a long way to go. One ad the USWA sponsored as part of their campaign against steel imports was headlined "FOREIGN ASSAULT ON AMERICAN JOBS AND COMPANIES UNCOVERED!" During an anti-WTO rally, Steelworker President George Becker complained that "imports are inundating our borders." Finally, what are we to make of Steelworker President Becker's beeline from nationalism into cold-war rhetoric during the AFL-CIO's drive against Permanent Normal Trade Relations status for China? In addition to the loss of U.S. jobs, Becker said that part of the reason Americans should oppose normal trade relations with China is "they are communist," "our ideological enemy," and "a godless nation" (Speech at Detroit AFL-CIO Rally, April 25, 2000).

And how can a view of the Steelworkers' leadership as "radical" and the rank and file as "conservative" be reconciled with their respective roles in the canceled Kaiser Aluminum actions in Tacoma, Washington? Inspired by the demonstrations in Seattle against the WTO, locked-out steelworkers established an alliance with environmentalists and community supporters to take on Kaiser and its parent corporation, MAXXAM. Kaiser was attacking workers' rights. MAXXAM was clear-cutting forests. These abuses helped to unite Steelworkers and environmentalists against a common enemy. The Steelworkers and the Direct Action Network planned a mass, nonviolent direct action at Kaiser for March 25-26, 2000, which won the support of the King County (Seattle) and Pierce County (Tacoma) Labor Councils, Longshore Workers, Carpenters, Earth First!, and others.

With only a week to go before the action, and with activists and union members planning for the expected arrival of more than 1,000 supporters, the local Steelworkers leadership unilaterally pulled out. In public, the Steelworkers leadership claimed the union was too busy trying to pass two strike-related bills through the state legislature in Olympia to participate in the action. However, local activists (and some press accounts) attributed the Steelworkers' last-minute cold feet to fear that they would not be able to control the action. Either way, rank-and-file activists and their supporters were left holding the bag, and the developing labor-community alliance was dealt a setback.

When deciding who their allies are, activists may be well-served to put aside pre-conceived notions about who is "radical" and who is "conservative" and follow the old dictum, "Actions speak louder than words."

We have a different approach, one that focuses on the development of rank-and-file leadership. This is not because "wisdom" can only "emanate from the bottom up," or because workers are somehow by definition more left wing or militant than their union officials. The bulk of union members are, in fact, not active in their unions. During most times, only a minority of the workforce is focused on strengthening their union and organizing resistance to the employer. Union officials, on the other hand, have to cope with the issue of union strength every day. This leads many activists to focus on the officialdom, rather than the ranks as their primary organizing partners. But this way of posing the issue badly misses the point.

On most days, the bulk of working people are not sufficiently organized to effectively fight collectively. Bu

the material conditions of their work lives (deteriorating working conditions, declining health care, stagnant wages, and unsafe working conditions) generate organized resistance from at least a minority of the workforce. In every workplace there is a layer of workers who are more open to seeking improvements through collective organization. They are the ones who step forward to be on organizing committees during unionization drives, the ones who run for shop steward, or participate in union reform caucuses. Ultimately workers need to organize and struggle collectively if they are ever going to advance their interests in their workplace. None of this makes sustained collective struggle inevitable, much less inevitably victorious. But as long as there are bosses, workers will resist in some form.

We believe that the task of activists is to develop the organizing and leadership skills of workers as a whole – and the activist layer of workers in particular. This means working with rank-and-file leaders to develop their ability to mobilize other workers to unite and fight:

- to win relatively small disputes over workplace injustices like contract violations, health and safety violations and supervisory harassment;
- to take on larger fights like contract mobilizations, unionization drives and strikes; and,
- to make connections with social struggles outside the workplace.

The size of this activist layer will vary, and is often small. But its presence – and conscious self-organization – is nevertheless critical, because life in today's lean and mean workplace is forever creating organizing opportunities. As labor journalist and Solidarity member Kim Moody has written, "There comes a point when the pressure and inevitable indignities of intensified exploitation outweigh the fear of job loss...and open conflict returns to labor relations." At such times, when increasing numbers of workers are open to collective organization and struggle, the accumulated experience of an organized grouping of rank-and-file activists can make the difference between victory and defeat.

This was certainly a major factor in the victorious 1997 United Parcel Service strike, labor's most significant strike victory in more than a quarter of a century. In a time of largely defensive struggles, UPS Teamsters took on a multinational giant and won substantial gains. They won not

just because of the International Union's forward-looking leadership and savvy contract campaign, though these were key, but also because rank-and-file militants largely organized through Teamsters for a Democratic Union led the struggle in UPS centers and pickets lines across the country, mobilizing around – and in direct opposition to – conservative union officials who opposed the contract campaign and strike. This layer of worker activists at UPS would not have been nearly as broad or organizationally coherent without TDU's decades of organizing at UPS.

Of course, the presence of a self-organized layer of rank-and-file activists does not guarantee victory in any given contract battle, strike or organizing drive. But even in the wake of stalemates, partial victories or defeats, sustaining the presence of an organized layer of activists is crucial. It keeps the most forward looking fighters together, acts as a brake against demoralization and defeatism, and keeps the process of learning and organization moving forward so that the next wave of activists doesn't have to reinvent the wheel.

The exact organizational form that holds these activists together is not crucial. In reform unions led by leaders with a rank-and-file orientation, it can be a stewards' council, a "solidarity committee," or a leadership advisory council, for example. In a non-union context, a workers' center can be the organizational glue that keeps activists together. But in most union contexts – where officers are wary of (if not hostile to) member involvement that they do not control – meaningful activist self-organization will require a rank-and-file caucus, a rank-and-file newsletter committee, or some other informal grouping that seeks to pull together activist members who share a commitment to democratic organization and struggle.

What Makes Labor Officials So Cautious?

We hardly see struggles on the scale of the UPS strike every day. During "normal times," capital is highly organized and powerful, and workers are poorly organized and weak. This has been particularly true in the United States over the least 25 years. This relationship of forces has bolstered the tendency of union officials to seek an accommodation with capital. These officials have seen labor on the defensive for decades and have witnessed unions on the losing end of big confrontations with employers – Staley/Tate & Lyle, Caterpillar, Bridgestone/Firestone, the Detroit Newspaper Association to name a few. They know the tremendous risks involved, and they are exceedingly wary.

Only a very few union officials are racketeers or bought off in the stereotypical sense of taking payoffs under the table. While many officials are self-serving careerists, many others are honest unionists with a conservative perspec-

Organizing for Educational Justice

I became a teacher in 1999, drawn to the job as an opportunity to work with young people and their communities on issues of race, gender and class oppression. In the late 1990s, a growing number of California teachers were drawn into struggles around political issues by state propositions that had a devastating impact on teachers and education.

First came the anti-immigrant Proposition 187, which made teachers an arm of the INS and would have forced us to check students' immigration status. That proposition was passed but was eventually defeated by legal challenges. Then came Proposition 227, a proposal to end bilingual education. The refusal of organizations that were opposed to Proposition 227 to explicitly discuss racism left me frustrated. When the next round of attacks on students of color came, I was determined to be part of a different approach.

Governor Davis published a list of California's "100 Worst Schools," based on the results of the state's standardized test, the Stanford 9. Not surprisingly, there was a direct correlation between the governor's list and schools located in communities of color. A group of teachers, many of us active in Second Opinion, the reform caucus in United Teachers Los Angeles (UTLA), a merged local of the American Federation of Teachers (AFT) and the National Education Association (NEA), began a group that later became the Coalition for Educational Justice (CEJ).

CEJ brings together teachers, parents and students to struggle together for real reform in schools. CEJ organizes campaigns against race and class biases in the educational system. For example, under the California state educational code, parents have the right to have their kids opt out of standardized testing without the student suffering any negative impact. In reality, this right is hidden from parents, and principals are very hostile to it being exercised. CEJ informs parents and students about their rights and has organized demonstrations to defend the rights of parents and students, as well as the rights of teachers who have been unjustly disciplined for "advocating" that students not take standardized tests.

CEJ also organizes to pressure the school and the UTLA leadership. Through its newsletter and through its presence in decision-making bodies of the union, CEJ members and their allies in Second Opinion successfully pressured the union to put is proposed "Classroom Bill of Rights" front and center in contract negotiations. The proposed Bill of Rights gave teachers the right to grieve poor conditions and a lack of materials. It also put a cap on class size in every classroom. During negotiations, CEJ organized a demonstration of teachers, parents and students at the School Board to support the union's proposal on these issues, but also to pressure the union leadership not to cede these demands.

Ultimately, the union leadership caved in, dropping the Bill of Rights in exchange for a pay increase. When a proposal to recommend that members approve the contract came up for a vote in the Union House of Representatives, CEJ and Second Opinion activists forced a tie vote blocking recommendation. On the board of directors, recommendation was defeated outright. Unfortunately, after a big push by the leadership, the membership voted to approve the contract. But this is not the last time that Second Opinion and CEJ, who have a large crossover membership, will be raising these issues.

CEJ is consciously attempting to do something very unusual. Rather than developing a parent-student group that supports teachers' demands, CEJ aims to be a real coalition where leadership is shared and there is an awareness of the power and race dynamics that can exist between the three groups.

No decisions are made on high and passed down. Monthly meetings in schools and community libraries are the forums here experiences are discussed and used to develop both strategy and goals. Intensive and deliberate recruitment is done to courage parents and students especially to be involved in all aspects of the organization: from making presentations to cilitating meetings to serving on steering committees.

EJ is by no means a socialist project. Its campaigns and programs are grounded in the ideas and aspirations of the hers, parents and students who have come together to work for change, the vast majority of whom are not socialists. But to the character of its aims, CEJ does allow for the exploration of the contradictions of public education under capitalism, for workers and communities affected by these contradictions to formulate demands on the state and define an alternative ion for schools and education. I see myself in this work for the long haul, building what I hope will be a useful example of a multiracial grassroots movement.

Rebecca Solomon is a founding member of the Coalition for Educational Justice.

tive on what is best for the union and the members. Their focus is on maintaining peaceful labor relations, in order to boost corporate productivity and, in turn, to maintain members' employment and the union's dues base.

A smaller number of union officials have a progressive orientation, and are more open to the idea of membership mobilization. But in a period when worker organization and militancy is low, even well-intentioned, progressive officials who want to build union strength are faced with the day-to-day task of negotiating contracts and defending workers from a position of relative weakness. This has a powerfully conservatizing effect on all union officers, even on rank-and-file reformers who are elected to office by a membership insurgency, let alone union officials who have been in office for decades.

These conservatizing influences grow stronger the higher up the union chain of command one looks, as officials become more and more removed from the daily indignities and injustices of the workplace and their social world becomes increasingly dominated by other high-level officials, attorneys, consultants, and employers.

Frontline union organizers and representatives as well as more progressive local officers (especially those who are tied to union reform movements) occupy an uncomfortable buffer zone. They fall between the upper level of career union officials and staff, who are wedded to labor-management cooperation, and rank-and-file workers who face the reality of management's assault on their rights in the workplace.

Having a political perspective that prioritizes rank-and-file organization and struggle can help frontline officers and staffers resist the pull toward accommodation and cooperation with employers. However, the most important counterbalance to the conservatizing influence of being part of the labor officialdom is not one's ideas, but organization. Reform officers are much more likely to stay wedded to their principles if they are part of a reform movement that keeps them linked and accountable to rank-and-file activists.

Meanwhile, at the top of the ladder, the circumstances of career union officials are very different. Their social and economic well-being depends upon the health of the union, not the level of organization and struggle in the workplace.

In fact, career officials, struggle and independent membership pose the threat of internal

political challenges and "dangerous confrontations" with employers that could jeopardize their positions and the union itself. Not surprisingly, these officials seek alternatives to confrontation – routine bargaining, the grievance procedure, labor-management cooperation and support for Democratic "friends of labor" – as a substitute for promoting worker militancy and organization.

That is why we argue that a successful challenge to labor's dominant politics and practices must be powered primarily by activism that is independent of the union officialdom.

So What's a Radical Activist to Do?

Where does that leave activists who have a different vision for the labor movement and want to be involved in working to transform it?

We suggest that activists judge the role they would assume in the labor movement – be it as staff, rank and file or other – by whether it allows them to advance self-organization, militancy and leadership development on the part of workers themselves. Issues that activists should consider include:

- **Individual Problems or Collective Action?** Will our work lead us to focus on resolving individual problems or building organizations to take on collective problems?
- **Mobilization or Accommodation?** Will our activism be directed at building the power of workers to win gains through direct action and struggle or will legal and more bureaucratic strategies (arbitration or accommodations between business agents and management) be the primary vehicle through which disputes are resolved?
- **Top-Down or Bottom-Up?** Will our activism allow us to promote democratic, collective decision-making so that rank-and-file workers exercise real authority in determining priorities, strategy and direction over their organizing drives, contract campaigns, and local unions? Or will we primarily be mobilizing workers around directives determined by decision-makers who are not accountable to rank-and-file activist leaders and the broader membership?

This pamphlet includes examples of the kinds of activism that Solidarity members have chosen to engage in and the perspective behind that activism. If you find yourself interested in the "from-below" perspective and are considering how to get concretely involved, here are some areas of activism to consider:

Rank-and-file union activism. If you are looking for work or open to changing jobs, it makes sense to look for positions where you have the opportunity to work with other rank-and-file activists. Solidarity members are active in the Teamster reform movement, New Directions in the United Auto Workers, and rank-and-file organizing among teachers, transit workers, communications workers, flight attendants, airline workers, clerical workers, graduate students, and health care workers. Contact the Rank-n-File Youth Project for suggestions and more information. (See the back page).

Internships or staff jobs with reform locals. A reform-from-below orientation doesn't rule out staff jobs. But it does mean that we should think strategically about the kinds of jobs that will allow us to direct our energies in the political direction we want. A staff job in a local run by reform-minded officers, particularly those with a relationship to union reform movements, is likely to provide the best opportunity for promoting rank-and-file unionism from a staff position.

Internships and staff jobs with union reform organizations like Teamsters for a Democratic Union, *Labor Notes* or the Association for Union Democracy represent other opportunities for staff activism that is crucial to supporting vital, but organizationally-fragile, rank-and-file caucuses and reform groupings.

Salting. One way in which activists can assist union organizing drives is from the inside, taking a job in an unorganized workplace and helping a union to organize there. Labor activists call this "salting." Some unions sponsor salts and work with them to help launch an organizing drive, which can make the experience less isolating. Salting provides activists a chance to be part of a union organizing effort on the ground.

Activism with Jobs with Justice, a workers' center, community/labor coalitions, whether as a staff member, volunteer or supporter can be another route toward labor activism that promotes independent worker leadership, collective action and organization.

Thoughts on Taking a Rank-and-File Job

When looking for rank-and-file work, there are many strategic and logistical considerations to take into account. First of all, you need to pay the rent, so you've got to go where they're hiring. Solidarity has compiled a jobs bank that lets you know who's hiring, and where. We can also provide local contacts in some cities who can help you locate available positions.

It's important to consider carefully a lot of factors before taking a job, but wherever you work as a union activist, you have the opportunity to learn a great deal, build solidarity, and exercise power on the shop floor. Small victories are important. There's work to be done everywhere, and smart young activists are needed everywhere. It's important to be strategic about where you go and what you do, but it's also important not to get paralyzed waiting for the perfect situation.

What are some of the basic considerations for choosing a job?

Level of organizing activity: Finding a job where there is already some organizing activity offers real benefits. You can learn from workers with a history of organizing, and your experience will be less isolating if you are joining forces with others. A union with a high level of activity or an existing rank-and-file caucus will offer activism that you can plug into. A workplace where there is a union will offer more job protection than a non-union workplace, and a context that makes organizing activity seem less risky or foreign to your co-workers. If an opportunity at a union job isn't available, taking a job as a salt in a workplace that a union is targeting for organizing is more likely to produce an organizing opportunity than trying to start an organizing drive as a new hire in an unorganized shop.

Maximizing our impact: Activists need to think strategically about where they choose to work so that their efforts can have the greatest effect. How many workers work at the workplace? How central is the workplace to the operation of the company or its industry? How important is the local union to the national union? By working in large workplaces, new activists can draw on the experiences of a greater number of workers. By choosing a workplace or job that is central to the operations of a company you can locate yourself where workers have the greatest potential power against the employer.

Don't go it alone: Rank-and-file work can be confusing and frustrating. Activists need a support network to help them deal with the political and organizational questions rank-and-file work poses. Try to find a workplace that has multiple openings, and see if you can get fellow activists to join you there. It's quite a jump from a university campus to the shop floor. Having a support network of people to bounce ideas off of, work with, and vent to, will help keep you going. Solidarity members serve as such a support network by helping one another think through our work and experiences.

Avoiding burnout: Building a new labor movement from below is not an easy task. Passing out a few incendiary fliers at work won't radicalize the working class, and fast talk will impress less than proven activism on the job. If you want to help build a new labor movement through rank-and-file activism, first you have to build the trust and confidence of your fellow co-workers. That takes time. Activists need to find jobs they can do for years.

The work itself: Few jobs are easy and all come with their particular mix of hardships and rewards. If you are looking for a job you can stay with for years, rather than months – a key to rank-and-file work – then you need to think about the type of work involved and what is best suited for you. Boring, repetitive work can be worthwhile if it provides sustainable opportunities to organize. One Solidarity member sought out the position of janitor in an auto plant because it allows her to move freely and talk to workers throughout the plant during her shift. On the other hand, some jobs not only present good organizing opportunities, but also provide the chance to learn a new skill, and pay and benefits that rival some professional jobs.

What's there to learn: We all will have several jobs over the course of our lives. Each one makes for a different learning opportunity. Look for a job where you will be able to practice your skills and gain new ones. You may acquire a technical skill, learn to speak a new language, organize around grievance and workplace violations, or participate in a rank-and-file contract campaign. By grounding your politics in a concrete workplace experience, you will be able to test your ideas and beliefs, and learn from your co-workers. Even if you don't end up staying at a particular job for long, the experience of being involved in workplace organizing from the inside-out can be an invaluable reference point in future activism.

See the back cover for more information on the Rank-n-File Youth Project, an exciting project forming clusters of young rank-and-file activists.

Organizing Ourselves as Socialists

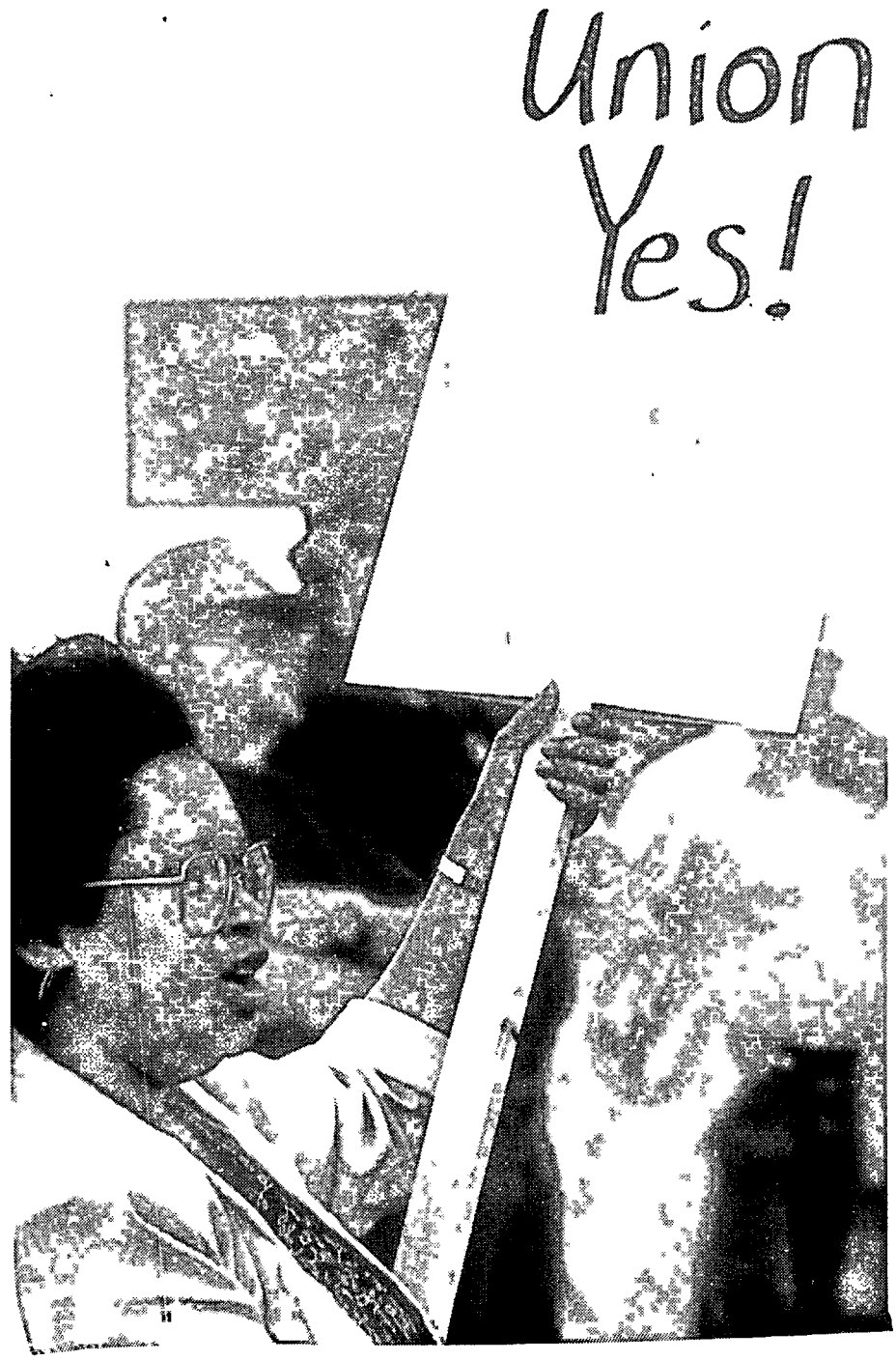
Solidarity labor activists take movement organizing seriously whether we are building worker-controlled organizations of struggle, cross-union formations and community-labor coalitions, or promoting alternative class-based politics in the Green Party or Labor Party.

While any of this work can be done as an individual activist, we believe that just as workers are more effective when they organize collectively, so too are socialist activists more effective when we organize together. Solidarity members work together to:

- **Strengthen working-class resistance and organization**. Solidarity members are activists and movement builders. Like anyone else, we have a lot to learn by participating in the labor organizations and struggles we've discussed here. But we also have a lot to contribute, including experience with building and maintaining democratic organizations, helpful political principles about democracy, militancy, anti-racism and feminism, and a long-term perspective and commitment that helps sustain movement through low periods of struggle.

- **Draw others to labor activism from below**. Some of us were labor activists before we found Solidarity. But many of us became labor activists after we learned about socialist politics and Solidarity's reform-from-below strategy. As an organization, we seek to win workers and other activists to our rank-and-file politics to strengthen the "from below" current in the labor movement.

- **Share experiences and grow as organizers**. Principled labor activism can be inspiring and fulfilling, but it can also be stressful, isolating and bewildering. Solidarity functions as a network through which we share ideas and strategies. We discuss our work and get ideas and support in local meetings. We sponsor regional and national retreats for labor activists where we dialogue about the challenges and questions we confront in our work and about our work's relationship to our goals



for revolutionary change. And we hook up newer activists with more experienced ones to have a mentor and an ear to bend.

- **Link labor and social movement activism.** The most dynamic working-class movements, both historically and today, have been those that brought together labor, community and political issues. Where possible, we try to make such links in our labor activism today. Working over the long haul toward a fusion between a revitalized labor movement and resurgent social movements for racial, gender and environmental justice is central to our vision of socialist activism.

- **Root the activity of socialists in the struggles of working people.** To be a real political force in society, let alone the dominant one, socialist activism has to be rooted in the working class, not just on campuses or in radical and progressive movements. Through nonsectarian labor activism we hope to build a bridge between socialist activists and labor militants who have been largely isolated from one another since the 1950s.

- **Spread and develop socialist ideas.** Most of the workplace activism that Solidarity members do – organizing workers to build power in relation to employers and labor bureaucrats – already cuts against the grain, without us also trying to win every worker over to socialist politics. Only a minority of rank-and-file activists is interested in radical or socialist politics, or is likely to be in the foreseeable future. But while we focus on building rank-and-file caucuses, democratic unions, and community-based labor organizations on a broad political basis, we also need to educate interested workers and other activists, including ourselves, in socialist politics. Like any groups with a common goal, socialists need organization too, in our case to promote a socialist vision to others and to deepen our own ability to build a working-class movement for a socialist society.

Solidarity is an organization of socialist activists, active not just in labor work but in many other areas of political activity. Our members have a wide range of views on political questions, including the issues discussed in this pamphlet. We are a long way from the kind of society we want to live in and don't claim to have any magic answers about how to get there. But we do have guiding principles that we believe help point us in the right direction.

- We see our labor activism from below as **the most viable strategy for developing rank-and-file leaders** and building power for workers on their jobs as well as in their unions and other organizations – in short, for restoring new dynamism and strength to the labor movement.

- We see **resurgent labor activism linked to social struggles for racial, gender and environmental justice** and against corporate globalization, as the key to building a broad working-class movement that can challenge corporate domination of our economic and political life.

- We believe that **challenge to corporate power must ultimately confront and transform the capitalist system itself** and transform our society on a revolutionary, egalitarian basis so that economic and political power is wielded democratically by and for working people, not by and for capital.

That new society cannot be willed into existence. It is not just around the corner. But it is not a fantastic dream. The seeds of that new society are being planted today in struggles against "free trade," corporate globalization, police violence, environmental racism and ecological destruction – and in the labor movement. And these seeds need to be nurtured.

Growing numbers of activists are being drawn to labor activism from below. And they are having an impact in struggles throughout the labor movement. Our challenge is to strengthen these forces wherever we can, and to draw growing numbers of workers and other activists to this strategy. At the same time, we need to organize ourselves more effectively as socialists so that a socialist vision becomes the outlook of more and more activists, both inside and outside the labor movement.

Socialist participation in labor activism from below can do more than contribute to labor's revitalization. It can make socialist politics and activism a meaningful part of a broad social movement for economic and social justice.

Case Studies:
Labor Activism from Below

Rank-and-File Activism at Verizon

I'm an installation and repair technician at Verizon Communications, and a member of the Communication Workers of America (CWA) Local 1101. CWA 1101 represents approximately 10,000 technicians and cable splicers in Manhattan and the Bronx, and has a reputation as a fairly militant local.

In a time when many unions are reluctant to engage in job actions, let alone to strike, CWA has shown its willingness to aggressively defend previous gains and expand its reach into new areas. The recent two-week strike at Verizon, involving 87,000 CWA and IBEW (International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers) workers, culminated in an agreement with gains on all the major issues. The contract reduces barriers to organizing Verizon wireless workers, increases job security, limits Verizon's ability to move work to other states, ensures that the growing high-speed data work will remain in the bargaining unit, and limits forced overtime in the most egregious cases.

Members and officials often compare the CWA to an army. The officials (generals) send orders down to the troops (members), who are expected to carry them out. Compared to unions that function as insurance companies for their members, an army may not sound so bad. But the CWA's brand of top-down militancy has its weaknesses.

The strike was an example of the contradictions inherent in "militancy from above." We won a good contract. But there was little strike preparation among the membership, and the local distributed almost no information on bargaining issues. Members had no role in negotiations or in strike decisions. The pitfalls of this approach were clear at the end of the strike.

District One (New York and New England) reached an agreement with Verizon on August 20, and directed their 50,000 members to return to work. But returning strikers in Manhattan found members from CWA mid-Atlantic locals (District 13) picketing their worksites. District 13 hadn't yet settled with Verizon. Local 1101 officials told members to cross the picket lines, arguing that the mid-Atlantic regions remained on strike over "local issues."

Members were angry and confused. Some returned to work; some stayed home; others refused to cross. The local changed its position to: "do what you're comfortable with; we'll back you up either way." Two days later, under heavy pressure from International President Morty Bahr, embarrassing media reports, and angry members, Local 1101 President Joe Connolly requested permission from the International to take the District One workers back out on a sympathy strike. Verizon reached an agreement with District 13 later that day.

Figuring out how to orient myself as an activist in this context of top-down militancy has been challenging. Our contract provides for good pay, good benefits, and strong safety language, and in my job title, workers have a lot of freedom to control the pace of work. Any disciplinary action the company tries to implement is fought tooth and nail. There's a general sense of "this is a great job" and "our union gets things done." But there's also a sense of "the union fights harder for some people than others" and "we're kept in the dark."

The local's method – instructing people what to do, and then not having an on-going organizing plan in place to build and sustain the action – means participation in job actions is uneven. Since members don't have any voice in the decision-making, they don't necessarily feel committed to follow through. They never agreed to it. They never voted on it. This lack of participatory democracy impedes our ability to organize as effectively as we could.

Underlying all of this are tensions regarding race. I don't know the data for the local as a whole, but my workplace is approximately half people of color (the majority

African American, with smaller numbers of West Indians and Latinos) and half white. While the stewards are a diverse group, the leadership of the local is not. On an executive board of 13, there is one African American and one Latino. There are no women. The lack of representation above the steward level undercuts unity by strengthening Black members' perception of the union as a "white guys club." That's not to say that Black workers aren't involved in the union. In my shop the majority of stewards are Black. They're often more militant than the white stewards, partly as a result of feeling that managers discriminate in favor of white workers.

There are ways in which my workplace is pretty segregated. Black workers hang out together, and white workers do the same. People often orient to stewards from the same racial background. But there are ways in which those barriers are broken down as well. For me, being in a union has provided a way to engage with people from different racial and cultural backgrounds on a wide range of issues. Being involved in a common struggle together provides opportunities to build relationships and develop multiracial alliances. On a day-to-day level that's meant talking openly with my co-workers about race and discrimination, calling white co-workers out on racist comments, and looking to more experienced Black co-workers for leadership.

There are a few different lenses through which I try to evaluate my actions and decisions. Obvious questions are: Is this an effective strategy? Will it be successful? But I also ask: Will this help develop a layer of activists? Will it strengthen members' belief in their ability to enact change? Will it deepen my political relationship with my co-workers?

My current goals are modest. Organizing shop-floor meetings where there is a discussion and debate – and ultimately a vote on job actions. Fighting for open shop steward elections every two years. Getting information to people during the next contract campaign and strike. Setting up a member-to-member network where different people take responsibility for a small number of members, to get them involved in job actions, relay information and solicit input from them.

The real test will come as the company tries to cut costs and push for higher productivity, as they've already begun to do. Verizon just announced the elimination of 10,000 jobs through attrition, cutting back overtime and firings. Supposedly none of the 6,000 people actually laid off will be union members. But will Verizon try to weaken the no-layoff clause in our contract in the next round of negotiations? Will they put global monitoring systems and portable computers so they can track us at all times, the way UPS does? Those are the kind of fights that can push people to think seriously about whether we are as organized as we could be.

Pam Galpern is a shop steward in CWA Local 1180 in New York City.

Rank-and-File Leadership for Rank-and-File Power

I have been a union organizer and representative for four years and have worked for several unions. My experiences have helped me clarify the difference between mobilizing models that are staff driven and mobilizing models that derive strength from rank-and-file democracy.

I became an organizer/union representative at Hotel Employees and Restaurant Employees Local 100 (HERE) in the spring of 1998. The Local 100 leadership was shifting as much of the union's resources as possible to organizing non-union workers. Building worker committees in companies where the union already had members was a key part of the plan. The stated strategy was to use these committees to simultaneously fight for better contracts and working conditions at unionized workplaces, and to work with staff to organize non-union restaurants and cafeterias.

The job seemed like a chance to work collaboratively with rank-and-file leaders and to link the task of internal union organizing with organizing the unorganized. I was excited about the opportunity to work with union members to build power in an abusive industry built on unsafe working conditions, low pay, excessive hours and the exploitation of recent immigrants. It also seemed like an opportunity to link workplace problems to community issues such as amnesty for undocumented immigrants, access to housing and education, and police brutality that were affecting our members and potential members.

Members who were part of worker committees were eager volunteers but often had to be pushed or dragged to attend committee meetings. At these meetings, there was a clear tension between the union staff's agenda and shop issues that workers wanted to talk about, such as miniscule wage increases, scheduling problems, and unsafe conditions in the kitchens. The union leadership position was, "We can't do anything about the serious problems until we organize more of the industry and have more power. Therefore, the thing for members to do now is have staff organize the unorganized."

The problem of weak bargaining leverage was very real. Building greater union density in the industry was an essential part of any effective strategy to build union power. It would be a disservice to those union staff who were sincere about winning better working conditions to understate the difficulty of fighting for better contracts when so much of the industry was unorganized. Unionized employers resisted providing higher wages or better working conditions than their non-union competition. And it was difficult to pressure a unionized restaurant when the same employer owned non-union restaurants from which it could continue to draw revenue during a strike or contract campaign.

But equally real was the problem that union members were not willing to act as volunteer organizers when they felt that their union was not fighting for better conditions in their own shops. In order for members to want to organize workers in other facilities, they needed to feel that the growth of their union would actually mean something. The union's failure to seriously build its internal steward and committee structure to fight for better contracts and to enforce members' rights undermined its organizing agenda. The rhetoric coming from union officials about "organizing the unorganized" was not based on members' own ideas but the union's needs as perceived by its officials. Most of the union's educational workshops deteriorated into staff lectures on the need to organize. There was no honest exchange. The result was membership cynicism, not a collective consensus about what was needed in order to strengthen our bargaining position within the industry.

I had one shop that broke the pattern, Windows on the World, the restaurant located atop of the World Trade Center. The 250-plus members there worked under a weak contact negotiated before any workers were even hired. Shop leaders and active members took the lead in organizing job actions to win cooked food for the night crew, better-scheduling for the dishwashers, and better treatment from the supervisors and executive chef. Members took much more from these actions than staff-conceived actions because they were driven by the concerns and initiative of the members themselves. The members in that shop learned that "We are the Union" can be more than a slogan and that their actions could win change.

The members at Windows on the World taught me what motivates members to assert themselves on the job and in their union, and how to work with members, not following cookie-cutter directives.

The author was a representative for HERE Local 100.

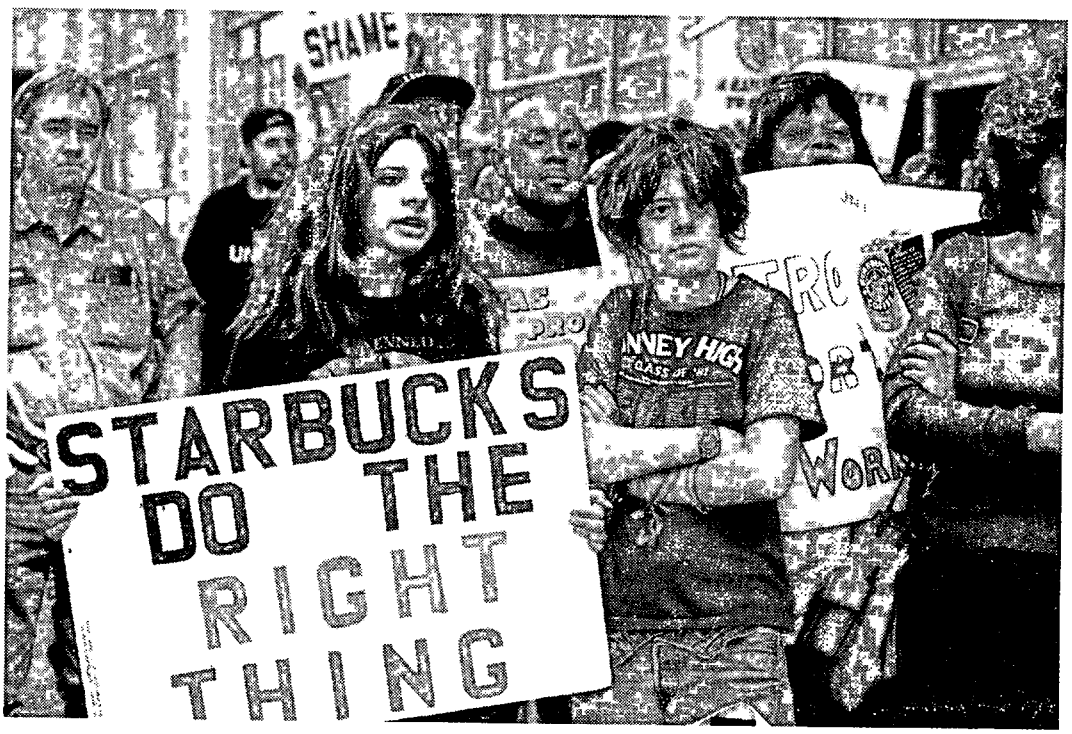
A Union Rank-and-File Awakens and Discovers Its Power

In the summer of 1995, dead broke and desperate for a job, I put my not-so-marketable liberal arts degree to work by taking on a position as a bus operator on the routes that cover the sprawling University of Texas community. Although I was then suffering from severe radical activist burnout, I quickly found myself immersed and energized – first as a rank and filer and later as an elected officer – by the workplace struggles of our union, Amalgamated Transit Union (ATU) Local 1549.

This experience of the concrete and immediate day-to-day forms of the class struggle reinforced political convictions I had in a firsthand way about the role of rank-and-file power in revitalizing the labor movement and ultimately in achieving the broader goal of socialism. Without this direct experience no doubt these ideas would have remained in my mind as hazy rhetoric, free of the weight of being tested by empirical reality with all its attendant problems and contradictions.

This experience had a "climax" of sorts in the summer and fall of 1999 with the union's intense campaign for a new contract against ATC/Vancom, our employer. This crisis smiled favorably on us as we won most of our demands. Our victory was based on a sustained mobilization of the union made possible by changes in the very way that we in the local did our business.

In many ways this change reflected the call by many on the labor left to shift the labor movement from a "service" model with union members as customers to that of a "mobilizing" model with the members as vibrant activist participants in the internal life and struggle of their union. Of course on paper that sounds very simple, but on the ground in actual practice it is a very difficult road. Sometimes when the fight seems immediate and fresh, the members will really get out there and blow you away with the strength of their activism – petitioning, flyering and raising hell like the best of activists. Sometimes though it just doesn't work, but that pessimism is for another pamphlet.



ATU Local 1549 by the mid-nineties had become sleepy and complacent. Founded by New Left activists in the 1960s, the local always maintained a formally democratic nature. However, in practice the local sometimes lagged in allowing for vibrant, full participation by members. This became increasingly dramatic over the years as the job expanded and changed into a full-blown part of the city's public transit system. As the job changed so did the system's workforce. Mostly traditionally blue-collar and minority workers joined the predominantly white countercultural workers. The internal life of the union, dominated by a core of older, overworked and increasingly burnt-out officers, began to suffer. Union membership (optional in the "Right to Work" state of Texas) slipped to under 40 percent of the total workforce. Meetings were sparsely attended, while most of the basic work of the union

unattended. In general the local was in a really weak position.

Management understood this weakness and exploited it. In 1995, management tried to force the first concessionary contract on the union. A rank-and-file movement of drivers organized by fellow radicals voted down the contract by a solid majority despite its strong recommendation by the International Union (backed by the threat of trusteeship). Although the contact was eventually rammed through in a revised, yet still concessionary, form in 1996, members got a taste of their power.

Shaking off some of its slumber, the local became more mobilized. A leadership was elected that acted more as a team, if still imperfectly. Internal organizing became a real priority with an aggressive campaign to organize all the workers in the company from the drivers to the mechanics to the badly paid fuelers and cleaners. Just as importantly, workers were made to feel that it was truly their union. Workers who had felt alienated from the workings of the union, mostly young, lower-seniority and minority drivers, were encouraged to join, participate and help run the union. The new faces in the leadership helped as did the increasing reliance of the union on more public campaigns, rather than backroom deals.

These public fights, while still weak, had a cumulative effect. We went from no activity to petitioning to bucking the contractual ban on workplace actions with a mid-workday "union picnic." This reawakening built us a springboard for the later more fully participatory involvement during the contract campaign.

The local was in a far stronger position for its real test n 1999. In the spring of 1999, ATC/Vancom, a Chicago-ased private company, was awarded the private sub-ntract from the city transit authority. We were initially timistic as the company had previous dealings with other U locals in other cities.

These illusions were quickly dashed as the company lared our contract null and void. In negotiations man-ment unveiled how they planned to make up for the ball bid they had put forward to win the subcontract: queezing the workers. The company held firm for a ercent raise in wages over the proposed three years e contract. This amounted to a reduction in our real given the rapidly escalating cost of living in Austin's high-tech "boomtown" environment. Management also demanded a strong curtailment of the generous attendance policy, less due process in the discipline procedures and other workplace concessions. Clearly we weren't all going to get along.

Instead of passively waiting to fight a defensive battle over narrow issues after a long set of closed-door negotiations (with the membership left outside wondering what the hell is going on), the union leadership embarked on an entirely new road. Members were polled several times on what issues were important to them. Large, surprisingly well-attended meetings were held to discuss the findings of these polls and to hash out more specific or clearer positions. Very rapidly a sort of mass collective consensus seemed to develop on a range of issues from health care to wages.

As it became increasingly clear that management was not going to budge on its demand for concessions (let alone grant the workers their own growing list of demands), the consultation meetings began to run into action meetings. Flyers, petitions, and a full-blown media campaign were drawn up and activist tasks were apportioned to more and more rank and filers. Membership in the union rose to a little under 80 percent as the ferment grew. Importantly, out of these meetings another new layer of leaders (many of who hadn't even been members of the local) came forward. Made up primarily of African-American workers, this layer added its voice and militancy to the contract campaigns – a campaign that seemed to be drawing to the inevitable conclusion of a full-fledged strike.

Toward the end of the summer talk of a strike hung in the air. Virtually no ground was being gained with the company in negotiations and the membership was increasingly feeling both indignant and more powerful. With the end of the contract coming in October, the union leadership decided to bring things to a head. At our largest meeting in that period, the vote to strike was called. To the leadership's pleasant surprise the vote was nearly unanimous.

After the strike vote, the contract campaign really began to take on momentum. More action meetings were matched by more rank-and-file activism. Flyers were handed out everywhere: at campus stops, hangouts and the buses themselves, to the consternation of management. Much effort was put into building support from our riders, UT students and staff. Demonstrations, letters to the editors and other pressures were brought to bear on the company.

Things began to take on a real intensity as the deadline approached. Arguments broke out and a sudden defection to the anti-strike forces by the local's chief steward shook some of our confidence.

The strike deadline itself came and went as an anticlimax, a few tense days of waiting and then quite simply the company folded. Company negotiators suddenly found that it was possible to give up much greater annual wage raises and to concede to several of our other points. Stunningly, we had won.

The experience of that contract campaign was an invaluable lesson in my life as a radical. Without it, rank-and-file power would have always seemed more of an ideal than a realizable force that could win real change.

Chris Kutalik formerly served as treasurer and shop steward of AFL-CIO Local 1549.

Labor Notes: "Putting the Movement Back in the Labor Movement."

Through its monthly magazine, biennial conferences, schools, publications, and formal and informal networks, *Labor Notes* helps activists exchange strategies and critically evaluate labor issues from a rank-and-file perspective. As one of the few independent forums of its kind, *Labor Notes* is valued as a critical resource by many grassroots activists and seen as a threat by much of the labor establishment.

I arrived at *Labor Notes* in 1991 just as a *Troublemaker's Handbook* rolled off the press and a staff expansion ushered in a new era of activities. I had turned down a well-paying job to stuff mailings for the *Labor Notes* conference as an intern and get a view of the activist heart of the labor movement.

I got that view for the first time when a thousand people came to the conference from across the United States and around the world to build their organizing skills, share strategies and re-energize for their activist battles ahead. This was the start of my six and a half years on the *Labor Notes* staff.

During my time there, *Labor Notes* was on the cutting edge of activism and debate around the key issues facing the labor movement:

Labor-Management Cooperation: *Labor Notes* had already made a mark with two books analyzing labor-management cooperation, a philosophy the AFL-CIO embraced. *Labor Notes* exposed "team concept" as serving management's agenda and undermining unionism. Authors Mike Parker and Jane Slaughter conducted several intensive schools on the topic, even traveling to Europe and Japan to share their analyses.

Team Concept School: Participants from various unions discovered common experiences with the programs and developed strategies to maintain union power. Eventually, attendees from *Labor Notes'* schools became teachers themselves and contributors to *Working Smart*, Labor Notes' updated book on the subject, which also addresses "re-engineering" and the role of racism in pitting workers against each other.

Sexism: Coincidentally, as the Anita Hill-Clarence Thomas testimonies gripped the nation, we reissued *Labor Notes'* first book, *Stopping Sexual Harassment*. Unlike the many books that appeared on the topic, ours emphasized an organizing approach for union members and we held union trainings.

International Solidarity: By the time NAFTA passed, *Labor Notes* was already doing cross-bo

organizing and had published *Unions and Free Trade*. We worked in alliances with organizations in Canada and Mexico, and with local union activists in the United States, to send auto workers to visit *maquiladoras* in Mexico. We held tri-national meetings and developed solidarity and rapid response networks. Our international work was helped by our relationship with Transnational Information Exchange, a kindred organization with staff in Germany, Russia, Brazil, and in the *Labor Notes* office. By 1995, *Labor Notes* conferences were being translated into Spanish, Portuguese, German, Japanese, Korean, Haitian and Creole.

Union/Community Alliances: We also worked to develop alliances with labor organizations outside the union movement like Black Workers for Justice and other workers' centers that tackle issues of immigrant and marginalized workers. We promoted the growing living wage efforts that brought together labor-community coalitions for economic justice.

The Longer Workday: I had the chance to work with locked-out Staley workers from Decatur, IL, organizing tours and solidarity actions and participating in strategy sessions. Their lockout highlighted the issue of increasing work time and eroding family and social life. Staley had imposed 12-hour work days and rotating work shifts on employees, most of whom were more than 50 years old. The workers vowed to turn the plant into a parking lot before they would accept the wholesale destruction of their working conditions and family lives. They launched a valiant corporate campaign, criss-crossing the country to tell their story. But ultimately, their International Union sold out their struggle.

The Staley fight was one of several strikes and lockouts fueled by rising working hours and management-imposed alternative work schedules. *Labor Notes* published a pamphlet, *Time Out*, on these issues and the increase in part-time and temporary jobs.

Union Reform: A primary role of *Labor Notes* is working with rank-and-file reform efforts in various unions, including the Teamsters, Auto Workers, Service Employees, AFSCME, hotel workers, California state employees, transit workers, railroad workers, nurses, Steelworkers, and Machinists. We cover their efforts, help them to build their networks and to strategize.

Democracy and Militancy: The 1991 election of Ron Carey and reforms in the Teamsters had paved the way to John Sweeney's ascendancy in the AFL-CIO. While *Labor Notes* welcomed the change at the top of the AFL-CIO as positive, we remained critical of Sweeney's top-down methods and incomplete agenda for rebuilding the labor movement. *Labor Notes* continues to emphasize union democracy and member mobilization as essential to union power and growth. Its latest book, *Democracy is Power*, was in the works as I left the staff.

Since reading my first copy of *Labor Notes,* which lured me to join the staff, I was able to contribute as conference organizer and co-director, navigating the big picture and working with people hands-on to strategize about shop-floor problems. Today, *Labor Notes* has several new young staff with backgrounds in organizing the unorganized, international labor, and community-labor organizing, and it continues to be a place to work with grassroots activists who are "putting the movement back in the labor movement."

Simone Sagovac worked at Labor Notes from 1991 to 1997.

Preaching Radicalism or Building Organization?

For most of 12 years, I drove a bus in Austin, Texas with the Amalgamated Transit Union (ATU) Local 1549. I was 19 when I started in 1988. The union leadership was pretty tame, and the membership was similar. There were individual conflicts with the management (grievances over discipline, scheduling, etc.), but little collective action around common problems.

I was new to politics and wanted to spread radical ideas. I started putting out incendiary flyers, calling for the destruction of capitalism, sabotage, etc. There were folks who liked my propaganda, but most just thought of me as the crazy radical guy.

In my small local, officer positions are unpaid, so there was not the fierce stranglehold on these positions that characterizes most unions. In 1994, I was nominated for a position on the local executive board. When I won, I shifted my focus from political propagandizing to organizing my co-workers around workplace problems and trying to strengthen member participation in the union.

I never hid my radical politics, but I focused on doing grunt work on issues that affected people directly, like discrimination, intimidation and dishonest supervisors, safety problems, etc. I also learned to express radical ideas in everyday language.

Rank-and-file organizing wasn't easy or quick, but over time we built our organization and power. After the first year, there were enough of us to vote down a massively concessionary contract proposal. But we didn't have the strength to win much in positive gains.

We kept building the union and three years later, during the next round of contract negotiations, we were prepared. We blew the company away, achieving almost all of our demands with a rank-and-file mobilization that included the members in all decision making.

Getting people to participate in group actions, building a rank-and-file contract mobilization and getting my co-workers to participate in the life of the union was much harder than just writing up and passing out radical flyers. But it was much more fruitful.

Because I had shown that my ideas had direct relevance for our workplace, people were willing to listen. Because we shared years of working and struggling together, I had credibility among my fellow workers and they could hear and agree with the radical ideas that not so long before were far outside their lives.

Most importantly, they went from being a largely inactive membership to one that would mobilize to collectively confront management. We didn't overthrow capitalism with our actions, but we did create a new base of unionists with the knowledge, skills and the drive to confront bosses with militant and democratic worker self-organization. This is the foundation that is necessary if we are to create a radical workers' movement that can achieve a fundamentally different kind of society.

Joshua Freeze is the former president and recording secretary of ATU Local 1549.

Direct Action Meets Labor Solidarity

It's a sunny day and a small group of striking Teamsters is standing guard on their picket line outside Rode and Horn Lumber in Brooklyn. A scab driver starts to pull out of the yard to make a delivery. Mounted security cameras, hungry to capture any illegal disruption or picket line violence, prohibit the strikers from taking any action to block the truck.

A voice cries out "Scab!" and suddenly a soccer game erupts in the street. The bewildered driver confronts the strikers who are watching the game from the sidewalk. The strikers laugh and shrug their shoulders. "It's some soccer players from the neighborhood. What do they have to do with us?"

Actually, "they" are activists from the Direct Action Network Labor Solidarity Working Group. Before the Rode and Horn strike is through, DAN Laboristas will block trucks with mobile bicycle brigades and visit customers to encourage them to do the right thing, while reserving the right to take action if they don't. When we got to the part about taking action, we handed over an article with photos of the Seattle protests against the WTO to let them know what action means.

DAN was formed in preparation for the actions in Seattle. In New York City, we formed the DAN Labor group to give community support to primarily local labor. Our goal in forming DAN-Labor was to make sure that DAN doesn't just chase down the big-shot capitalists at their meetings. As important as that is, we need to support local workers' fights, which are the foundation of anti-capitalist struggles. We don't support these struggles to get recruits, sell newspapers or because we have pretensions about being the ones who will "politicize" the workers. We do it to help workers win.

DAN-Labor is not a bunch of young students or a bunch of seasoned activists. Rather, the group includes a diversity of age and experience. Collectively, we have a lot of talent. We can block trucks and write press releases, take over offices and design websites, perform radical street theater and throw kick-ass fundraisers.

DAN-Labor is non-sectarian. It brings together socialists, anarchists, union members, union staffers, and others with few ideological disputes (considering). We are also able to show up as a small group to various events, or outreach to other organizations we are connected to for larger or more critical mobilizations.

DAN-Labor is non-hierarchical. Making decisions democratically and taking action collectively encourages us to share credit for our successes and responsibility for our shortcomings.

DAN-Labor is independent. We are not a union, so we can legally decide to engage in a secondary boycott or secondary picketing. This is a powerful tool. We are not funded by unions, so we don't have to fear alienating officials by supporting rank-and-file movements, workers' centers or independent unions – like the UE which represents workers at WBAI, a radio station that is being taken over and purged of its radical elements by Pacifica.

In less than a year we have done good work, especially in collaboration with striking workers. During strikes, we have been provided an opportunity to do independent direct action against the powers that unions are fighting,

and have that work appreciated.

We've been able to channel our desires to mess with bosses in support of workers' struggles. On a recent Saturday night, a group of us made reservations at *Il Monelo*, a restaurant which is in a dispute with the Hotel and Restaurant Employees Union. We munched on free bread and quizzed the maitre d' about the picket line outside the restaurant while we tried to "decide" whether we wanted to order.

The maitre d' innocently tried to explain the situation to us. "The union was too expensive, so we had to get rid of it," he said. When we asked how he got out of a legal contract, he told us, "We just had to close down for two months." That's about when we stormed out, encouraging other diners to do the same. How often do you get an opportunity like that?

As a new group, we are not always as large, diverse, or organized as I would like us to be. However, I can say that not only is what we are doing important, innovative, and fun. I am actually *proud* of this group. A feeling that's been all too rare in my activism.

Siobhan McGrath is a community and labor activist and a member of UAW Local 2110.

Building Worker Power Through Popular Education and Collective Action

Ten years ago, Immokalee was a vicious town, a mean, divided, dog-eat-dog town.

Ten years ago, Immokalee was less a community than a labor reserve, serving Florida's agricultural community. It was one of the United States' poorest towns, existing solely to benefit Florida's richest industries.

Thousands of young men, moved by desperation in Guatemala, Mexico and Haiti, left their families and flocked to Immokalee for the right to earn $5000 or $6000 a year doing some of the hardest, most dangerous manual labor this country has to offer. Their labor was, and remains, the basis of Florida's billion-dollar citrus and winter vegetable industries.

The division between workers, the every-man-for-himself ethic, was the basis for the agriculture industry's tremendous profits. Ten years ago, wages in Immokalee, already well below the poverty line, were in the middle of a twenty year decline. Picking piece rates were stagnant and real wages had lost nearly half their value since the 1970s. The farmworker community, torn by ethnic and linguistic divisions, an unrivaled transience, and the constant fear of deportation, was powerless to fight back. Workers could only watch as their pay continued to slide, shake their heads, and work that much harder every year to try to keep up.

Today, Immokalee's farmworkers are still poor – but they've mobilized and struck to win several historic pay raises in the tomato industry over the past three years that have shifted tens of millions of dollars in wages from the growers to the farmworkers.

Housing is still scandalously overpriced, over-crowded and rundown – but workers have organized and compelled the state to slate ten million dollars for new farmworker housing.

Labor and human rights abuses are still common in the fields – but workers have exposed and forced the successful prosecution of three slavery operations in Immokalee.

What has made these changes possible is worker organization and the growing sense of community in Immokalee. Indeed, today, for the first time in its history, is possible to truly call the town a community. Worke are coming together, speaking in their own voice, defen ing their own interests, and setting down roots to contin the fight into the future.

The organization behind these changes is the Co tion of Immokalee Workers (CIW). The CIW sta about eight years ago, when a group of farmworkers gan to meet to discuss their problems and to look for v that workers themselves could improve their own l Immokalee has a long tradition of service agencie dressing one or another of farmworkers' many prob But never before had Immokalee's workers come to

as workers to analyze their situation, mobilize their power, and define their own agenda for change. That started happening with the birth of the CIW, and it marked the beginning of a new chapter in the history of Florida agriculture.

The analysis behind CIW's organizing approach is that the mentalities that divide the farmworker community against itself and sap its strength have to be overcome for united action to be possible. Today as eight years ago, the CIW's efforts focus on building awareness, using methods of popular education to address the issues that divide and hold back the farmworker community. Many workers are familiar with popular education from organizing experiences in Mexico, Guatemala and Haiti.

The CIW spends a significant amount of effort as well in conveying those methods and other tools of education and organization to farmworker leaders, creating an ever-expanding base of community leadership to direct the organization's growing program. Even CIW actions are chosen with an eye toward building leadership and awareness among the membership, with participatory, sustained action being the priority, as they provide an excellent context for education and reflection.

On this foundation of critical consciousness and community leadership, the CIW has combined general strikes, fasts, a month-long hunger strike, and most recently a national boycott against Taco Bell to win unprecedented movements – both on the job and in the community – in a place that only ten years ago was one of the meanest, most hopeless towns in America.

With every passing year and every new victory, workers grow more determined to establish a new community, a new place in the agricultural industry, a new life for themselves that more fairly reflects their contribution to Florida's prosperity.

Greg Asbed is an organizer with the Coalition of Immokalee Workers.

Appendices:

More on Building a Movement from Below

Organize (the Rank and File) or Die

What the AFL-CIO leadership says is true. Unions must "Organize or die." If the labor movement doesn't grow quickly and in large numbers, the old unions will soon be irrelevant. Just to maintain the same percentage of unionized workers, unions must organize 400,000 new members each year. They need to organize nearly 1 million workers a year to raise the percentage by one point.

This very real problem can make the reform of existing unions seem like less of a priority than the immediate goal of organizing new members. If the two goals weren't so related to one another, that might be the case.

But unions must do more than devote increased financial and staff resources to organizing if they are going to attract new members on the massive scale that is required to reverse the labor movement's crisis. Such growth will most likely require a wave of organizing that will only be made possible with a fundamental change in the way unorganized workers see unions.

This is where rank-and-file reform efforts become crucial. Democratic, militant unions that are fighting and winning are the kids of unions that unorganized workers will be more likely to want to join. As John Sweeney himself said, "You can make a million house calls and run a thousand television commercials and stage a hundred strawberry rallies and still not come close to doing what the UPS strike did for organizing." What Sweeney didn't mention was that the UPS strike was made possible by a decades-long struggle for reform in the Teamsters Union that won members the right to vote for International officers and ultimately succeeded in electing reform leaders.

In the early '90s, that newly elected Teamster leadership began to implement the membership-mobilization models that proved successful in the UPS strike. They also rebuilt the union's organizing department and reversed a 16-year decline in union membership that saw the Teamsters lose more than a million members. When the old guard within the union took back the Teamsters International in 1998, President James Hoffa fired the International organizing staff and gutted funding for new organizing. Not surprisingly, Teamster new organizing declined sharply. Teamster membership actually dropped by 11,000 members in Hoffa's first two years in office.

Struggles like the UPS strike and subsequent labor victories have the potential to change many unorganized workers' perceptions of unions. But they are just a start. Many workers have come to see unions as irrelevant, a just another interest group, or worse, as parasitic organi zations only interested in their dues. This is partly due t pervasive anti-union propaganda in our society. But, it als stems from the bureaucratic – and sometimes corrupt practices of labor unions themselves.

As any union organizer knows, the most effective a union propagandist is a worker who has had a bad ex rience with a union. Such workers are less likely to wa union elsewhere, and more likely to discourage co-w ers, family and neighbors from supporting a union. C versely, workers who have experienced their union powerful institution that has benefited them and their ily are the best advocates in an organizing drive.

Another largely untapped potential for building support among unorganized workers is the power of u to be at the forefront of struggles that benefit all wo people, not just union members. Unions have the nu of members and the resources to be the leading vo

welfare-to-work program which was assigning subway station cleaning tasks to welfare recipients at the same time that union cleaner jobs were being eliminated. With the support of activist organizations of welfare recipients, New Directions demanded that all cleaners be union members who are paid union wages.

Organizing labor support for anti-racist struggles. When mobilized, the labor movement can be a vital ally to anti-racist social struggles. For example, New York City labor activists, particularly from SEIU 1199, mobilized in large numbers against the police murder of Amadou Diallo. Labor activists have organized educational events, passed union resolutions, and mobilized in support of justice for death row prisoner Mumia Abu-Jamal and against the death penalty. Actions for Mumia include a one-day work stoppage by longshore workers on the West Coast and a daylong teach-in organized by the Oakland California teachers' union.

Supporting the self-organization of people of color. In many unions, members have formed Black and Latino caucuses to make sure that their issues are being addressed, that the organization is organizing against racism and reaching out to workers of color, and that its leadership reflects the rank and file. Organizing by these caucuses helped lead to the changes in the AFL-CIO's policy on immigration and the adoption of statements demanding justice for Mumia Abu-Jamal by the Service Employees International Union and the American Postal Workers Union, among others.

The Organizing Institute

The AFL-CIO Organizing Institute (OI) is the first face that many younger activists considering labor movement work will encounter, and often appears as the most pragmatic way to get a foot in the door as a new labor activist. OI campus recruiters often pitch the program as a skills-building experience and a way to make a career out of social change. This is no doubt part of the attraction for students and ex-students who are looking to strengthen their activist skills and searching for a way to continue their political activism after graduation. And the OI, as well as the staff organizer jobs it funnels activists into, does provide important opportunities to gain experience in talking one-on-one to workers, running meetings, writing effective leaflets and seeing how unions operate.

But the goals of the OI run deeper than skills-building. As the arm of the AFL-CIO charged with what that organization views as its most crucial role, recruiting more members, it naturally embodies the broader political vision of the labor officials and staffers behind it. Its aim is to train a new generation of activists in the politics of the labor officialdom—a politics whose many problems we explore in this pamphlet.

While some efforts have been made to recruit organizers from the union membership itself, most of the OI's efforts have focused on recruiting student and ex-student activists, largely through outreach on college campuses. This recruitment strategy is made necessary by the model promoted by the OI of the heroic organizer with no personal life and no fixed home. At a *Labor Notes* panel on organizing models, OI recruiter Mo Fitzsimmons likened union organizing to a "Peace Corps-type experience," saying that organizers must be ready to work endless hours, under any conditions and spend "200 nights a year in a Holiday Inn." This conception makes a long-term organizing job impossible for workers with responsibilities to family and community. Even most 23-year olds can only sustain this pace for a couple of years before they burn out. No wonder the OI is constantly scrambling for new recruits.

Nevertheless, we are told that OI "kids" are "the last best hope of the labor movement," at least according to the *New York Times* in a magazine story produced with the help of OI publicists ("The Union Kids" January 21, 1996). The article depicts college graduates who fake Southern drawls (because a "college accent...just doesn't play right at all") in a spree of house visits to workers' homes that resemble door-to-door sales. There is not a single mention of a worker organizing committee, even a meeting of workers, let alone one where meaningful decisions are made collectively about the direction of the organizing drive. The problem here is not just that this model promotes the traditional stereotype of the union as a "business" or "third party" and the organizer as an "outside agitator," though these are serious drawbacks. Of greater concern is the way this model writes off workers as leaders in their own liberation.

The OI model contrasts sharply, and unfavorably, with successful member-driven (sometimes called "worker-to-worker") organizing strategies. Here, extensive education is used to build membership support for new organizing efforts and to develop a core of member organizers who help direct organizing drives – as volunteer organizers or by taking a union-paid leave of absence from their job to work temporarily as a staff organizer. These programs aim toward a sustainable organizing program that doesn't lead to inevitable organizer-burnout, but builds a cadre of member organizers whose mobilizing and leadership skills strengthen the union's internal and external organizing efforts. At their best, member-to-member organizing programs use full-time staff as a supplement, but not a replacement, to the efforts of member organizers.

This doesn't mean that it is necessarily a mistake to participate in OI training programs or to work as a staff organizer, even under less than ideal political leadership. Many of us in Solidarity who have done so improved our organizing skills and sharpened our understanding of the labor movement's dynamics through first-hand experience. But we also felt ourselves being trained in a model that we didn't agree with, and used as tools by labor officials who did not share our commitment to democratic, rank-and-file unionism. Ultimately, most of us preferred to move on and use our skills to work for projects that shared our political vision and promoted democratic worker self-organization.

The Democratic Party and the Fraying Blue-Green Alliance

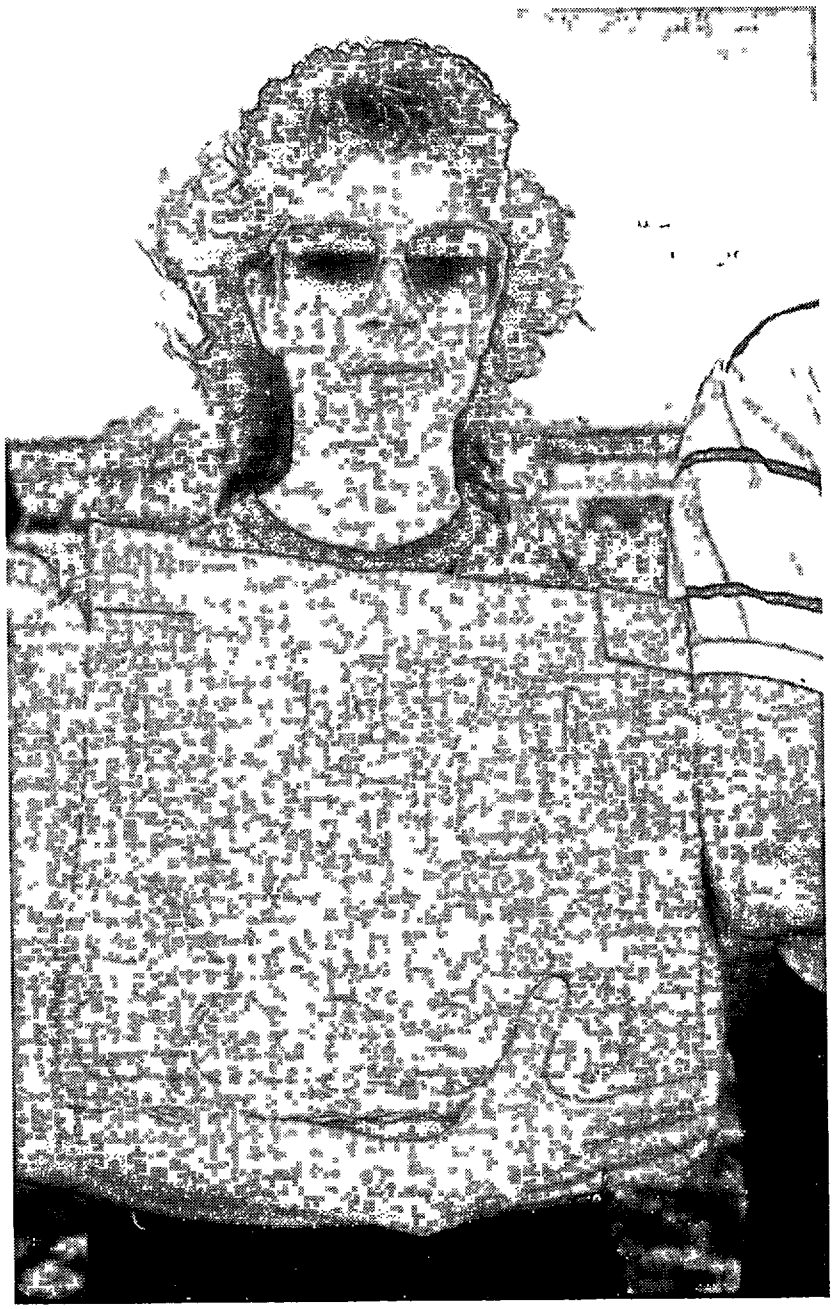
Labor's ties to the pro-corporate Democratic Party weaken its alliance with grassroots activists. This threat was manifest throughout the 2000 presidential election. The closer the November election, the more frayed the Blue-Green Alliance became.

The anti-WTO actions in Seattle are rightly seen as a demonstration of the promise of an alliance between labor, environmental and social movement activists. Often lost in the hype is just how ambiguous the AFL-CIO's participation in Seattle was. Right before the Seattle demonstrations, AFL-CIO President John Sweeney joined business leaders in signing a Clinton administration proposal to create a WTO "working group" to study labor and environmental standards. This move was designed to preempt demands for more fundamental change. Despite this ambiguous, if not treasonous, gesture the AFL-CIO to its credit stayed with the coalition organizing the Seattle demonstrations. At the demonstrations, however, the AFL-CIO leadership tried to keep union members separate from the activists involved in direct action disruption of the WTO meetings. Fortunately, a significant minority of union members in Seattle joined the direct actions that made Seattle such a powerful event.

Next came A16, the actions on April 16th to protest the meeting of the International Monetary Fund in Washington DC. The AFL-CIO chose to focus its efforts on a legislative campaign against Permanent Normal Trade Relations with China (PNTR). Not wanting to alienate legislators whom it was courting to oppose PNTR with China, the AFL-CIO was slow to show any support to its grassroots allies who were organizing the broader A16 mobilization. When the AFL-CIO leadership finally agreed to sponsor a rally on April 16th, it insisted that any flyers for the rally make no mention of the direct action mobilization planned for the same day. The Blue-Green alliance was still present, but Seattle was starting to look more like "a coincidence in the streets" than "a coalition in the streets." On April 16th, union members gathered at a passive rally, while activists conducted direct action.

The 2000 presidential election fully exposed the com-

promising nature of labor's ties to the Democratic Party. Many activist forces represented by the Seattle coalition had correctly recognized that the corporate-controlled Democratic Party was part of the problem and not the solution, and had united around Ralph Nader's presidential candidacy for the Green Party. The AFL-CIO took the opposite tack. After fighting Al Gore for eight years on issues like NAFTA and the WTO, the federation threw its full support behind him as a "friend of working people."



By the time the summer demonstrations against the national conventions of the Democratic and Republican Parties, the AFL-CIO was almost totally out of the picture. They maintained a token presence at the protest against the Republican National Convention, with staffers trying to hand out "Gore for President" buttons to incredulous activists. In L.A., however, while protesters confronted mounted police outside the Staples Center, AFL-CIO leaders offered praises to Gore inside the arena as convention delegates.

Things got uglier as Gore's campaign fizzled. At the first Presidential debate in Boston, activists protesting Nader's exclusion were confronted by Gore supporters mobilized by the AFL-CIO. The shouting matches – and isolated physical confrontations – between pro-Gore union demonstrators and pro-Nader grassroots activists were more reminiscent of the attack by New York City construction workers on anti-war activists during the Vietnam War than they were of the Blue-Green alliance seen in Seattle.

In the weeks before the election, the presidents of the SEIU, AFSCME, Auto Workers and Steelworkers publicly urged Nader to ask his supporters in swing states to vote for Gore. Steelworkers' President George Becker flat-out said that Nader should drop out of the race. Nader supporters were depicted as idealists who were being "misled by their leader."

Despite this arm-twisting campaign, some 800,000 members of union households voted for Nader.

The Democratic Party's campaign succeeded in preventing Nader and the social movements that backed him from getting the 5 percent of the vote activists had aimed for, but it failed to win Gore the election. As the Florida vote-count travesty unraveled, Democrats chose to ignore the many reasons Gore lost – the conservative record of the Clinton-Gore administration and the disenfranchisement and deliberate deception of Black voters, among others. Instead, they united around a simpler theory: "Blame Nader." AFL-CIO President Sweeney joined the chorus, calling Nader's candidacy "reprehensible."

Glossary

AFL-CIO – American Federation of Labor-Congress of Industrial Organizations. The AFL-CIO is a loose federation that includes most of the labor unions in the United States. Decisions of the AFL-CIO leadership are not binding on the member international unions.

Arbitration – A procedure for resolving contract violations, disciplinary and collective bargaining disputes (such as negotiating contract settlements). In arbitration procedures, disputes between unions and employers are sent to a supposedly "neutral" outside arbiter for decision. "Binding arbitration" occurs when both labor and management agree in advance to accept the arbiter's decision. "Non-binding arbitration" involves no prior agreement and the arbiter's decision is taken as advisory. Arbitration procedures vary widely, but are often heavily stacked against the worker. Arbiters, in the name of the "public interest," tend to impose or recommend settlements that favor management.

Concessions – Elimination of previously won union benefits. Often threatening plant closings and layoffs, corporations demand concessions from unions in their contracts: wage and benefit reductions, job cuts, elimination of health and safety precautions, decreased worker control over the speed and regulation of work. In 1979, Chrysler demanded, and received, a concessionary contract from the United Auto Workers, setting off a concession wave throughout American industry that seriously reduced workers' standard of living and exposed the weakness of most U.S. unions.

Contract Campaigns – The mobilization of a union's members to press for improvements in an upcoming contract negotiation. Some contract campaigns involve a "top-down" mobilization of the membership by the official leadership of the unions. Other contract campaigns see rank-and-file workers mobilize, sometimes with the leadership of reform officials, sometimes independently of their union leaders. Contract campaigns use rallies, member-to-member networks, and threats of strikes to build worker militancy and encourage the company to agree to a good contract. An aggressive contract campaign prepared the Teamsters for victory in the 1997 UPS strike.

Grievance Procedure – The formal process under which unions seek redress for members subjected to contract violations, discipline, or firing by the employer. In most cases, the grievance procedure treats the worker as "guilty until proven innocent," forcing workers to accept contract violations, discipline and even dismissal while the procedure runs its course. Often the grievance procedure can drag on for weeks, months and even years. Many union reformers criticize the grievance procedure as an example of "justice delayed is justice denied."

Labor for Nader Committees – Committees formed by union members and officials in the 2000 election to support the presidential candidacy of Ralph Nader. Committee members opposed the AFL-CIO's endorsement of Democratic candidate Al Gore because of his support for NAFTA and the WTO and his failure to push a real pro-labor agenda. Nader won the endorsement of Teamster Local 174, AFSCME 1108, the California Nurses Association, and the United Electrical Workers.

Labor Party – A party founded in 1998 with support from a few unions, notably United Electrical Workers and the former Oil, Chemical and Atomic Workers. So far, the Labor Party has not run candidates.

Lean Production – A system of manufacturing designed by corporate management to increase profitability through speed-up, increased surveillance of workers, and outsourcing and subcontracting formerly union jobs. Responding to falling profits in the 1970s, many U.S. corporations adopted lean production methods to increase control over workers, reduce the power of unions, and squeeze out more profits. Lean production is

also referred to as "management by stress."

Militancy – The willingness of union members to use confrontational tactics and strategies. Examples of militancy include slow-downs, work-to-rule campaigns and strikes. Militancy seeks to gain workers' demands through the disruption of "business as usual," specifically through the disruption of the smooth operation of the workplace.

Officials – Those people who are charged with running certain aspects of the union: union presidents, executive boards, vice-presidents, research staff, business agents, staff organizers. Some officials are elected by union membership, but many are not. In most U.S. unions, even at the local level, many if not most officials work full time or part time for the union, freeing them from working under the supervision of their employers.

Rank and file – The union membership: generally refers to working members without paid union positions.

Self-organization – The ability of workers to democratically organize themselves. At their best, unions represent the self-organization of workers, but too often unions impose organization – and control – upon workers from the top down.

Shop Steward – A worker elected by a small group of co-workers to enforce their contract and organize their day-to-day battles with management. Shop stewards are often the backbone of worker resistance and militancy.

Workers' Centers – Instead of trying to organize workers into formally recognized unions, these centers organize workers from many different workplaces around issues of unpaid wages, health and safety violations, and other employer abuses. Concentrating on workers typically ignored by traditional unions, workers' centers focus on poor and immigrant workers in highly exploitative industries such as agriculture and the garment trades.

WTO – The World Trade Organization. Founded in 1994, the WTO regulates the trade rules of its member nations, both tariffs and other "barriers to trade" like labor laws and environmental regulations. The WTO is seen by many activists as an attempt by corporations to eliminate what little remains of government protection of working people, indigenous cultures, and the environment. In November 1999, a coalition of labor unions, environmental groups, and students dramatically came together in Seattle to shut down the WTO meeting.

Tools for Radicals

Labor Notes

Labor Notes is the best source of news on the labor movement and rank-and-file reform movements.

To subscribe: Send a check for $24 to *Labor Notes*, 7435 Michigan Ave., Detroit, MI 48210

www.labornotes.org

Also check out their new Troublemaker's page: www.troublemakershandbook.org

Handbooks

Martha Gruelle and Mike Parker. *Democracy is Power! Rebuilding Unions from the Bottom Up*. Detroit, MI: Labor Notes.

Jane Slaughter. *A Troublemaker's Handbook 2*. Detroit: Labor Notes.

Dan LaBotz. *A Troublemaker's Handbook 1*. Detroit: Labor Notes.

Camille Colatosti and Elissa Karg. *Stopping Sexual Harassment. A Handbook for Union and Workplace Activists*. Detroit: Labor Notes.

Schwartz, Robert. *The Legal Rights of Union Stewards*. Cambridge: Work Rights Press.

Books

Kim Moody. *Workers in a Lean World: Unions in the International Economy*. London: Verso.

Kim Moody. *An Injury to All: The Decline of American Unionism*. London: Verso.

Dan LaBotz. *Rank and File Rebellion: Teamsters for a Democratic Union*. London: Verso.

Dan Clawson. *The Next Upsurge: Labor and the New Social Movements*. Ithaca: ILR.

Solidarity Pamphlets

Kim Moody. *The Rank-and-File Strategy for Building a Socialist Movement in the US*.

Dan LaBotz. *The Fight at UPS: The Teamsters' Victory and the Future of the "New Labor Movement."*

To order either pamphlet, send $1 to Solidarity, 7012 Michigan Ave., Detroit, MI 48210.

Want to be an inside organizer?

The Rank-n-File Youth Project can help!

Who we are

We are young workers, youth activists, and students working to build a stronger labor movement from below.
We have clusters of young rank-and-file activists developing in several cities and industries in the US.

What we do

We take jobs together in targeted workplaces and industries.
We form clusters of young labor activists for personal support.
We share useful tactics and develop common strategies for our jobs.
We train each other as thorough and creative workplace activists.

Get involved

Are you interested in taking a rank-and-file job?
The Rank-n-File Youth Project can help you identify jobs in select cities and industries.

Spread the word

Do you want to tell other activists about the Rank-n-File Youth Project?
We are setting up meetings in neighborhoods and campuses to talk about the project.

Contact Us

If you're interested in taking a rank-and-file job or setting up a meeting in your area, drop us a note:
ranknfileyouth@gmail.com

We are SOLIDARITY!

Activists who are Socialists, and Socialists who are Activists

Solidarity is an independent, non-sectarian socialist organization committed to the struggle for democratic workers' power, the replacement of capitalism with a new society without exploitation or oppression, and to the liberation of all oppressed peoples through their own freedom struggles.

Our members participate in rank-and-file movements in a number of unions and in anti-racist, feminist, environmental, anti-globalization and other social justice movements. In these movements we seek to build coalitions, link issues and strengthen rank-and-file democracy. Within our own group we are trying to develop cultural diversity, flexible practice and straightforward socialist politics.

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